CORONET

THE CAMERON STORY

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MORTON COOPER

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THE CAMERON STORY

Flip, unloading cartons of milk at his father's market, was reliving every moment of that Wednesday when he first saw her.

He had seen her from about forty feet away.

Monica Spencer.

Younger than she'd been in the old movie on television.

Naked.

Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them; how much more are ye better than the fowls?

—*Jesus Christ to His disciples*

The Cameron Story

Morton Cooper

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To Eddie Moran and Jim Kaufman
with thanks
and to Jane Rice
with passion

The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening

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Chapter 1

1

At seven o'clock on that damp evening in April, after a long day of school, a cello lesson, and a fencing class, the girl arrived home on Rutledge Road, her braced teeth chattering, her small body screaming pain. The station wagon was in the garage but the Lincoln was not, which meant that her parents were out together for the evening.

The housekeeper was drinking coffee and reading a newspaper at the kitchen table, and asked her if she had eaten, if she wanted a sandwich before she went up to her room to do her homework. "I ate. I'm not hungry," the girl answered, and started for the stairs. Something made her stop for a moment, a ravenous urge to throw her books and shoulder purse down and rush into the large arms of the large, round, brown woman she rarely talked with, and cry, and say, finally, what was wrong, so terribly wrong. Instead, she said, with an evenness that surprised her, "See you in the morning."

"Let me feel that forehead," the housekeeper declared, scraping her chair back. "You're looking fevered."

"I'm all right," the girl said, halfway up the stairs.

"Mind you don't leave your window wide open like you did last night," the housekeeper called. "Night air's the worst air. Catch your death that way. Hear?"

In her bedroom, across the hall from her parents' bedroom, the girl locked her door and switched on the ceiling light, trembling, sure that this was the hardest day, the very worst day, yet. She quickly undressed to her slip, and moved quickly from place to place in the high-ceilinged, immaculate, expensively furnished room, perspiring, instantly forgetting why she was at this closet or that bureau. In her private bathroom, she drank glass after glass of water, unable to relieve the intense thirst that had hounded her through the

long day. The cramps in her stomach were excruciating, the feeling of diarrhea persistent, and she tried to move her bowels, and couldn't. She put her rimless glasses on the top of the wicker laundry basket, ran the sink faucet until the water was nearly ice cold, and bathed her face with small hands that shook. She moved quickly from place to place again, trying to hold off, trying to remember where her glasses were, trying to ignore the agonizing crawling sensations that were over every inch of her skin, trying to pace away her cramps, her thirst, the fury of her fast heartbeats, her fear.

She placed a record on her player, waited numbly while the mechanism clicked and clacked, and cradled Mr. Dudley, the cloth-stuffed doll her father had given her when she was three, in her arms until she heard the music. Then she took from her shoulder purse one of the three envelopes that the boy had sold her that noon, one of the envelopes she had hoped she would not open for a week, if ever, and set it on her pillow. Because she was not quite five feet tall, she had to stand on the step stool to get the TWA blue flight bag, behind the row of other flight bags, from the high shelf of her clothes closet, the bag with the syringe needle and tablespoon, the matches and bottle cap. She carried them and the envelope to the bathroom, where she locked the door and readied the fix, her small hands shaking savagely, herself wretchedly conscious of the tormenting cramps and the insanely rapid heartbeat and the sweatiness and the feeling of diarrhea, desperate for all of it to go away.

She prepared to skin pop and then abruptly changed her mind. There had been times in the five months since she had started popping when the relief had come speedily, almost on command, but usually it needed a quarter of an hour, sometimes half an hour, to really go to work, and she knew this night that she could not endure the too-long wait. Unlocking the bathroom door, she hurried to her bureau, where she retrieved the Peruvian belt her mother had bought for her at Saks. She returned to the bathroom, locked the door again, and sat, and sighed, and closed and opened and closed her small fist until the belt was strapped as tightly as possible around her forearm and she could see the prominent bulge that was a vein. She paused, scared, hopeful that she knew exactly what she was about to do, hopeful that the powder was diluted enough with milk sugar for safety, that it was undiluted enough to make her reaction undiluted. She had never mainlined before, had promised herself she never would. Tonight, she would. She vowed that she never would

again, after tonight. She vowed that she would never get hooked.

The needle hurt her, and frightened her.

She waited.

She waited, and the pains gradually retreated, and she wondered where her handsome father and beautiful mother had gone this evening, didn't much care, hoped they were having a nice time, hoped their shiny new Lincoln would crash into a wall and they would be killed, wondered if she would ever have the courage to force them both or either of them to listen to her say she was shooting up, once a day and sometimes twice, that she wanted to stop shooting and didn't know how. She waited, and remembered what the boy had told her five months before, when she had let him talk her into her first fix, free, remembered and was comforted: "The junks you see and read about are junks because they were lost causes long before they ever started shooting. Dangerous? There are only two ways you can die from it—if you shoot bad scag from a dealer you don't know, and if you get forgetful too often and use a needle that isn't clean as gold. I'm tight with plenty of poppers and mainliners. They'll never be junks and they'll never die from it because they dig how to handle it."

She waited, and heard the *Eroica* from her record player. And laughed. Her parents knew all the ways to detect a young "addict" because the magazines told them. A young "addict's" music was loud rock only. The infantile repetitiveness of rock bored her; Beethoven enchanted her. A young "addict" spoke a shorthand consisting of like-man-dig-groovy. She never did, to anyone. A young "addict" dressed sloppily, did poorly in school, and stole to feed the "habit" from everywhere including the home. She dressed with meticulous grooming, earned straight A's, and had never stolen a pin. She laughed again. Of course she did none of these things, for the simple reason that she was certainly not an addict, but this was not why she laughed. She laughed because her so pathetically up-to-date parents were constantly fooling themselves. They knew nothing, about anything.

She waited no longer.

First there was the delicious relaxation and the release of all pain and all tension, and then the sudden rush of euphoria that swelled through her body and magically untied every knot that had been so tight barely two minutes before. She remembered how unreliable her concentration and coordination had been this day, how dreadfully she had played the

cello, how weird and disorganized she must have seemed in fencing class. She sawed the cello now, she thrust the rapier now, and she was magnificent, every reflex keen, all awarenesses fluid and flawless. The Cameron High girls who had excluded her were pleading with her to be their best friend. The Cameron High boys were fighting one another to have the first and last dance with her. Her handsome father and beautiful mother were loving her, not just praising her accomplishments to their Saturday night cocktail party guests. Her heart was filled with love, with forgiveness, and she stood and waltzed in the bathroom with each of the Cameron High boys in turn, and she was amazed that no one had thought to waltz to *Eroica* before. It was so easy, so natural. Everything was easy and natural.

Then something happened.

A ferocious, demanding sleepiness seized her suddenly. She was overcome by an alarming sense of panic, far more insistent than the whole day's unshaped fits of panic had been, and a frantic series of heartbeats she could hear, far more frantic than they had ever been before.

She searched for her eyeglasses. Everything would be perfect again if she could only find her glasses. The need to sleep grew. The sound of her heart and the sound of panic grew. She could not breathe, and then she could, but there was a vulgar wheezing in her chest. She went to unlock the door and go to the bedroom where she knew she would find her glasses, but she could not turn the knob.

The maniacal thumping of her heart terrified her. She would have to hide the needle and the tablespoon back in the flight bag. The other envelopes were in her purse, on the bed; she would have to get them before she slept and flush them out of sight, destroy them. The knob still would not turn. The wheezing was ragged and horrifying, the need to sleep was heavier and horrifying, the noise from her heart was horrifying. The boy she had trusted these five months had lied to her today. No, not lied—he surely just hadn't known how strong this supply was, or he would have warned her. Her throat was chokingly tight. She cried out to the housekeeper to come and help her, and she could hear her heart but not her voice. Suddenly she saw her glasses on the laundry basket, and swooped them up and mislaid them again, and pounded at the door with fists that would not pound, and saw her beautiful mother's coral lipstick and with a burst of energy wrote *i HATE You* on the mirror with it in an imprecise backhand but made a perfect circle over

the *i*, and she yelled without sound, and needed to sleep, and needed to breathe.

She sat on the laundry basket because the toilet seat was too far away, and she wept, and prayed, and called out again for help from a throat that would not let her call aloud. She was conscious of a strange, grotesque taste, and then she saw streams and spurts of blood coming out of her mouth and coursing over the new white slip her mother had bought for her at Lord and Taylor's. She slid from the basket to the bathroom's soft, carpeted floor, fascinated that she was still bleeding freely from her mouth, and she lost her urine, and the wheezing in her chest was louder, and she knew her mother would never forgive her, never, because it was a disgusting thing to do but her bowels were uncontrollably loose and she was defecating in her underpants and she could not stop. She thought of Mr. Dudley, and wanted him. She saw her glasses again and tried to reach them, and couldn't, needed desperately to rub away the word *HATE* that would hurt her parents, and couldn't, needed to clean her body, and couldn't, tried to breathe and, finally, began to suffocate.

Within an hour the girl, who was thirteen years old, was dead, her eyes open, her underpants and slip and part of the carpet of her private bathroom soiled with urine and feces and blood.

2

People drove past him on the highway, in spite of the cold, because of his long hair and beard, or because of his leather jacket and chinos, or because of the guitar slung over one shoulder, or because, like most of the people he had seen in his thirty years, they were hung up only on themselves and where they were going.

But finally he was in luck. A three-year-old beige Rambler stopped, and the driver, the only one in the car, rolled his window down a little and called, "Where you heading?"

"New York City," Tom Jara called back. The calendars said that the season was spring, but it wasn't and he was desperately cold.

"Let's see. I can ride you as far as Philly."

"Great," Tom agreed, and hurried inside the car, which was wonderfully warm. He threw his canvas sack in the

back seat and gently placed his guitar over it.

They smiled at each other and the guy opened the motor. He was about twenty, rich Joe College, hatless, clean-shaven, blond hair long but cut and combed banker's-son-neat, and he wore a camel's hair coat. The radio was on loud, playing fake rock, and he turned the sound down. "How long've you been out there?" he asked. "This weather's a buster for April. Your butt must be frozen off."

"Just about. I've been walking close to two hours. A guy gave me a hitch from Morgantown, and he let me off a couple miles back. No gas stations, no diners, no nothing to warm up in, so I kept walking, to keep the circulation moving. You didn't come along, I'd really be up Crapper's Creek."

"Help yourself to some firewater there in the the glove compartment. That'll warm you up."

There was a pint bottle of rye in the compartment, with two or three healthy swigs left in it. Tom did not like to drink, but he tipped the bottle to his lips, and after a few moments it did help. "Finish it, or stick it in your pocket and take it with you," the guy offered. "I'm on my way home from school for the midterm holiday. My folks don't believe in booze, so it's just as well you drink up the evidence. Listen, I hate like hell to kick you out when we get to Philly—Eskimos shouldn't have to be out on a day like this—but you'll get a lift. At least I'd take you where you can get into a diner or someplace."

"Thanks." Tom nodded and capped the bottle securely. "How far, about, is it from Philly to New York City?"

"Ninety miles, something like that. Are you really tapped out, if you don't mind my nosing? It shouldn't cost more than a couple of bucks from there by bus."

"I can probably swing that. I have this friend in New York City who has a job waiting for me."

"That's good. My name's Harv Milder, by the way."

"Hi, Harv. I'm Bob Kennedy," said Tom Jura.

"Um. I'll bet you've had it up to here with jokes about having the same name as *the* Bobby Kennedy."

Tom paused. "I'm me."

The guy nodded, and they both were silent for a while.

By the time they passed the first signs that alerted them to Pennsylvania and New York, they had shared a lot. Tom volunteered that he'd had some college out West, and then the Navy, that he'd toured with his own rock combo, and some sonofabitch he'd trusted had split with his bread and his chick, but now big things were waiting if he could get to

his New York City contact in a hurry. Joe College seemed to be a good guy, but rich, the kind of guy who'd never had to scuffle for his bread, the kind who'd always finally stepped on Tom Jara. He was thinking of going into pre-med, he said. One reason he had decided to go home this vacation, in fact, rather than spend it with his girl and her family in Vermont, was that he wanted to rap with his father about his future.

"What's your old man's gig?" Tom asked.

"He's a doctor. He wants me in the same field. That's natural, I guess."

"Well, what's natural for you? You want to be a doctor?"

"Oh, hell, I change my mind every week. That's why I want to rap it out with my Dad. Letters don't cut it, neither do phone calls. We'll come to something before I go back. He's a damned nice man, my Dad. He guides, but he doesn't push."

Tom felt the muscles in his throat grow hard. He knew that jealousy and envy were for the weak, he had always known it, and he was jealous.

"That's no answer, Harv," he pressed, cool. "You ever think of what's really natural?"

"Like what?"

"Doing whatever thing is yours. Nobody else's. Yours."

"Well, such as what?"

"How do I know your bag? You don't even know, if you have to ask. Whatever hits right is where it's at. You dig Borneo?"

"Borneo? The Tarzan movies?"

"Borneo. Tahiti. Wherever. You can groove *so* clean, if what you dig is what *you* dig, without the damned nice men telling you what you ought to dig. Happiness has a sound and a smell all its own, but you're the one's got to make it for yourself, man, or it's no good. They teach you at your college that happiness is something to be suspicious of?"

"No, but they teach that real happiness is something you remember you've experienced; something that stays with you and grows."

"Sure, that's what all the well-intentioned, damned nice men teach. And it's shit, man. Happiness is this minute, if you let it be, happiness is what turns you on and you know it. It's looking up in the clouds and finding faces. It's eating when you feel like eating, sleeping when you're sleepy; all a clock can do for you is tell you how many more minutes got away. Snow . . . snow means steam coming out of

your mouth, and red cheeks, and your toes frozen, but a big fire to thaw you out. Looking for God and finding God—you, me, we're God—right in a blade of grass. I didn't say joint of grass, I said blade, man—green, so green it blinds you. Being alive. Knowing when it's raining, knowing when it's not raining. Bleeding and boiling and laughing, and knowing what you're doing because you *feel* it, every minute, even when you're asleep. And no damned nice men to tell you whether you're entitled to feel what you're feeling. That's for *you* to dig."

"Okay. I'm hip. But what about the future?"

"The who?"

"The future. Preparing. Getting ready for the years ahead."

"The future doesn't exist, man, don't they even teach you that? We're a zillion years old, and one asshole Establishment after another's yakked, 'The future, the future, got to prepare for the future!' and they've always managed to screw it up, it and everybody within firing distance. Maybe *I'm* what it's all about, man. Maybe *I'd* be the Happiness Messiah that outscores your Establishment fuddies and your Jesus, the whole crowd. They said love thy neighbor, and as ye sow so shall ye reap, and I'm my brother's keeper, and a needle goes through a camel's eye quicker than a rich man gets to heaven. Okay, I can dig it. But is that where any of your Establishment men really are, loving their neighbors and putting down wealth? No way, man. My religion says you can love the sinner *and* the sin, and the way to make that sense is to live like you want to live, with no damned nice men guiding. The damned nice men kill everybody's freedom, including their own."

A few seconds, and College Boy nodded. "Some of that's pretty heavy, I have to admit."

When they began to pass the first signs that actually pointed to Philadelphia in one direction and New York in another, they had talked a lot more, and Harv Square acknowledged, "A lot you say makes sense. But without some rules, some structure—all right, call it the Establishments—we'd be living in a jungle. I guess I need both—freedom *and* a sense of purpose, a goal. Is that wrong?"

Tom smiled. "Whatever grooves for you. If I bug you, then *I'm* the Establishment, right?"

The air cleared, and College Boy mentioned that he'd give anything to find a place to take a leak, but the long stretch of highway seemed deserted of filling stations and a sign told them they wouldn't get to one for eighteen miles

Tom said, "I could take a leak, myself. We'll watch for something."

Presently they saw a truck ahead, to their right, parked in a wide shoulder space off the highway, a disabled and abandoned truck big enough and long enough for them to empty themselves in private behind it. The guy pulled to a stop next to the truck and got out. Tom hurried to the back seat, zipped his canvas sack open, quickly retrieved his hammer, and followed. The guy looked to be well over six feet, a head taller than Tom, and the relieved smile he gave Tom said he was enjoying his long pee. Tom ambled in back of him, raised the hammer high, and it caught the guy, hard, at the back of the skull. He hit again, and again, and again, and continued to smash down hard after the guy had crumpled. When he was sure the guy was dead, he emptied all of the pockets. He left a crucifix on a faggy necklace chain, but he stuffed everything else he found into his own pockets, including a wrinkled linen handkerchief monogrammed *H. M.* He walked back to the Rambler to try to determine if he had been seen, or could have been seen. He slid behind the black and chrome steering wheel, turned the ignition, returned to the highway, and drove away.

The radio was still playing, still low. The news was on, reporting all the normal, violent things that happened in a single day because man let himself get too uptight to dig himself and left no room to love: the Cong shelling the South. We in the South shelling back. A gang of spades busted in Washington while trying to storm the White House, fuzz fast on the scene, riot, blood, four spades shot down. The thirteen-year-old daughter of a well-to-do Connecticut family, dead of an o.d., damned nice Mama and damned nice Daddy in disbelieving shock. Tom laughed sadly at the violence, all the unnecessary violence. He worked the pushbuttons until he came upon a comfortable country and western, so comfortable that it pleased him.

"New York City, oh here I come!" he sang aloud above the sawing fiddles.

He didn't know Benny Moon's telephone number in New York City, but Spank had assured him it was in the phone book, under *Moon Music Company*, and that all he had to do was to say Spank's name and old Benny would roll out the velvet carpet.

If old Benny didn't, if something gummed up . . .

No. Don't look at it that way.

Tom Jara, thirty, in need of a hot shower, and hungry,

hungry for food and hungry for the world to climb off its ass at last and know him and admire him, was done with But What If. He was free, finally, and rolling. Everything was going for him. Guys trusted him and chicks fell out when he talked, and he had a very special brain in his head and a very special tool between his legs that so far had made eight states' worth of chicks so happy that it like to sent them off to the funny farm. He knew he was a handsome cat and a clever one, with strong shoulders and no belly, large and pale blue eyes, happy eyes, innocent eyes, watchful eyes that could freeze the bad babies when they had to. He had been out of commission for forty-seven months, but now he was on his way. He was Big Tom Jara, with so many untapped talents that they sometimes scared him.

"New York City, oh here I *come*, you beautiful son-of-a-bitch!" he sang and pressed the gas, and clenched the wheel so hard that his knuckles whitened.

But What If.

If Benny Moon, his only contact in the East, was a bum steer.

Screw things going wrong, he warned himself again. Too much has gone wrong in thirty years. After thirty years Big Tom Jara is past due for a break, a heavy one.

This is the week the loser becomes the winner. I *feel* it. Goddamn, this time I really feel it!

3

During the last quarter of the morning flight that carried him from London's Heathrow Airport to New York's JFK, Charles Forbes grew increasingly restless and eager to get home to his daughter. He was returning from London this morning, two days earlier than he had expected to, because the night before, as he had seriously begun to kiss Fiona Kendall in the bedroom of his Savoy suite, his sister Marcia had phoned him from Cameron with the monstrous news about Vic Donlin's child. "Jesus," he had said softly. He knew Vic and Edie Donlin, who lived three houses away on Rutledge Road, though they were hardly friends; he and Vic occasionally rode the early commuter to Manhattan together, and talked, and this was the extent of their contact. He supposed he rather disliked Donlin, a smug and greedy

and tiresomely opinionated man. The news of the child's death was of course monstrous, nonetheless.

Suddenly tense, he had asked, "What does this have to do with Nancy?"

"Nothing at all, directly," Marcia had answered, her voice a trace too controlled. "Nancy scarcely knew her—there's a three year age difference between them, after all. But I can tell she's upset. Just having such a dreadful thing happen here, right on the same block, a block that's never had any kind of trouble before. The police are talking to everyone in the neighborhood, asking questions. Two officers just left here—I forget their names. They talked to me, and then they talked to Nancy."

Forbes was outraged. 'Did they play rough cop with her? What the hell did they go to her for?"

"They're questioning everyone, trying to find out who knew the child, who her friends were. No, they were very nice, very polite with Nancy. She told them what I told them: we don't really know the Donlins, except to say hello to on the street. But . . . Charlie, unless it's absolutely necessary for you to stay, it might be wise to come home tomorrow. Nancy doesn't say so, but she needs you, not just me. She's levelheaded and self-sufficient in many ways, but it's not even a year since she lost her mother, and –"

"Yes. I'll be on the first plane."

Charlie Forbes, forty-six years old, was six feet three and a half inches tall, with a loose frame and stooped shoulders and the aura of a successful businessman, which he was, and the quiet assurance of a man who had become successful early in life, which he had not. Except for a deep cleft in his chin and deep pleats in his forehead, his long and lean and attractive face was smooth, almost tight-skinned. He had worked his way up at *Brant's Weekly*, the thriving, New York based news magazine, from editorial research to editorial itself, then slowly up all the rungs to the top, to managing editor of the whole store, at a $56,000 annual salary plus generous stock options. Five days before, he had flown to London on a disagreeable mission he had assigned himself—to look personally into why *Brant's* London bureau was in an administrative mess, to fire its charming but dissolute chief, Derek North, and to interview replacements while trying to steer the complex bureau back to some semblance of working order.

His second day there, he re-met Fiona Kendall, who headed the London office's ad department, a bubbly and

frequently urbane Liverpudlian he'd bedded the last time he'd been in England on business, three years earlier. They slept together again this trip, in her Knightsbridge flat and in his Savoy suite, spontaneously and without cat and mousing, as if there had not been an interruption of three years. He reveled in the rediscovery of Fiona's ample, perceptive body. She was the first woman he had gone to bed with since his wife Louise's death, and the nights with Fiona had been good ones, important ones, for they had shaped him into a sexual being once again. He was not yet free of Louise, nor did he expect he ever would be quite, but the trip, and Fiona Kendall, had marked the beginning of the return.

On this flight to New York, Forbes had hoped to whittle down the ton of neglected paper work in his attache case. Some work had got done, but his concentration was continually interrupted, and he was irresistibly drawn to reread the item in the air edition of *The New York Times* he'd bought in the hotel lobby before he'd checked out, the small, second section item with yesterday's Cameron, Connecticut dateline that told him little more than his sister Marcia had told him:

GIRL, 13, DIES OF HEROIN OVERDOSE IN CONN.

Dorothy Jean Donlin, 13-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Victor Donlin, 72 Rutledge Road, Cameron, was found dead this morning in her locked bathroom, of an overdose of heroin. She was the youngest person in the state to die of a heroin overdose, according to city medical officials.

Dr. Clyde L. Sindorf, Cameron's chief medical examiner, said today that the number of children and teenagers dying from heroin overdoses has increased in the United States as much as 300 percent in the last year.

Found at the girl's side, according to Cameron Police Chief Edwin Makorny, were a glassine envelope that had contained heroin, a syringe, some matches and a bottle cap, used to cook heroin. Found in her bedroom were two unopened envelopes containing heroin.

Preliminary investigation revealed no record of Dorothy Jean as a user of drugs.

Mr. Donlin, the girl's father, 48, is Vice President in charge of Sales at Alderdyce Metals, 659 Madison Ave., New York.

Vic Donlin, you poor, unlucky bastard, Forbes thought, what you and your wife must be going through, what you'll always go through. . . .

I remember a fragment of one conversation you and I had on the commuter, Vic. You'd moved your family to Cameron from New York, twenty-eight miles away, about a year after I moved Louise and Nancy there from New York. The city was no longer a place to raise kids, we'd agreed. The city had become not only a suffocation of crowds and polluted air, but, more and more, a sense of impending violence hung in that polluted air. You were absolutely convinced that you knew who, rather than what, made us uneasy about living in the city ("The colored and the Puerto Ricans, Vito Marcantonio brought them in by the planeload, for votes, and now look") and I fed you a crisp little lecture that the ACLU would have applauded - a useless lecture, of course, because you were convinced you knew what you were convinced you knew.

But I did take my wife and child out of the city for the same reason, basically, that you took yours. Psychopathy segregates itself to the city. If we run from it, it won't follow us. Once safely out, and the first mortgage payment made, we wave goodbye forever to everything that's sick and destructive.

Idiocy, Forbes thought.

Fly me to my daughter faster, he thought, as the 747 approached JFK.

He and Nancy were close. They had always been close. With puberty and the momentous discovery of boys, Nancy's affection for him had not lessened, though she had stopped hugging and kissing him with preadolescent Daddy's girl zeal, all of which was perfectly natural and right — and which he missed. Louise's lingering illness had brought them closer still. They talked a lot, usually in the big warm kitchen late at night (Louise wouldn't have tolerated his letting her stay up till midnight and after on school nights), coffee or a beer for him and hot chocolate or a Coke for Nancy, and they explored and they solved the riddles of her complicated universe. She was a nearly perfect child—no, young woman—strikingly alive and pretty, her teenage pomposities absolutely proper for her age, her questions thoughtful, her deductions often impressive. At these klatsches, he was careful to remain her father and her friend, but never a contemporary buddy; careful never to make preachments or to pry at her privacy beyond anything she chose to volunteer.

Forbes was satisfied that he knew his sixteen-year-old daughter better than most other fathers knew theirs.

And he was not entirely satisfied.

She spoke of nameless Cameron girls, her age and younger, who were experimenting with LSD and speed, and of course that route wasn't for her. She spoke of the sleazy reputations of some nameless Cameron girls, her age and younger, who slept around, and of course that route wasn't for her.

He believed her and trusted her. He hoped he believed her and trusted her.

Oh, hell. He did.

Nancy's day was not her mother's day, and certainly not her grandmothers' day. The world was very much with her, her and all kids who weren't ostriches, as it had not been for her grandmothers and her mother. There were no more Betty Grable movies promising happiness ever after through the simpleton process of being chastely kissed by Don Ameche. Forbes was grateful that her generation saw through and scoffed at the shams that her mother and grandmothers had been taught—that young people were automatically and unquestioningly expected to adopt their parents' values because they were right, that war hurts but is inevitable and ultimately somehow glorious, that Betty Grable and Don Ameche symbolize all that is good and true—Charlie Forbes was grateful, and always just a bit uneasy. He wanted all the Nancys, but his especially, to mature slowly. To be grown enough to recognize that ferocious tigers lurk, to be simultaneously young enough to wiggle their toes in cool, rushing brooks.

And, damn it, yes, to believe in Betty Grable and Don Ameche . . .

He did not reach Cameron until four in the afternoon because the airport had been short of customs inspectors, and traffic on the Merritt Parkway was absurdly jammed. It was raining when he got to the Cameron Motor Inn, and he had to stand in line for a cab. He was met at the door of his gracious white house by Marcia, sixty and a spinster, his only other living relative except for Nancy. She had sold her own house and closed up her comfortable life in Omaha to move here when Louise's body had finally refused to respond to the radium and cobalt. Marcia Forbes was at times a difficult sister, as, he supposed, all generation-gap

siblings were, but she was an unselfish and dear woman, and he sincerely appreciated her.

Coffee had been freshly brewed, but he preferred a Scotch and water. He roughhoused with Mop, Nancy's schnauzer, and, once he was assured that Nancy had been fine at breakfast this morning before school, asked about the Donlins. Marcia had heard nothing new, other than that Cameron's Superintendent of Schools, Ira Cox, had issued a heated public denial that any of the public schools had a drug problem. She had talked with Grace Humphries, who lived next door to the Donlins. According to Grace, Mr. and Mrs. Donlin were obsessed with possessions, and they gave noisy and extravagant drinking parties on weekends. They showered challenges rather than love on Dorothy Jean and kept her on a rigid schedule of school work, piano and cello lessons, ballet and singing lessons, even classes in fencing. They were a gregarious and physically handsome couple, and Grace said they were disappointed that Dorothy Jean was so plain looking and friendless and withdrawn in spite of all the money they spent on rounding her out. They sometimes boasted about her scholastic achievements at their drinking parties, she said—when they remembered to talk about her at all. Mrs. Donlin was distraught with grief and Mr. Donlin was furious; he was demanding that the police lose no time in finding the pusher who had murdered his child.

"I wonder if it would be appropriate for me to go to Vic Donlin," Forbes said. "We don't really know each other. Still . . ."

"Grace said they're not seeing anyone."

"Awful business," he said, and went to his ground floor den, where he checked his mail and phoned his office. He had been on the telephone for twenty minutes when he heard Nancy's voice, and he told his boss Ned Gilmore he would call back later. He hurried to embrace and kiss his daughter, who surprised and pleased him by embracing and kissing him back. "You're half drowned," he said, and helped her off with her orange slicker.

"Don't I *know* it!" she groaned, her smile huge and radiant. "It's been raining on and off since you went away, and about noon today it started to come down like Niagara. How was your flight? Do you know what you forgot to take with you? The pipe I bought you for your birthday. I was so mad at you when I saw it on your desk after you left, I swore I wasn't ever going to speak to you again. Oh, Daddy, I'm so happy you're home!"

Marcia appeared faintly miffed when Forbes told her he wanted to take Nancy to an early dinner, alone, but she said it was all right, that the roast she'd prepared for his homecoming could wait another day. Nancy came from upstairs, clothes changed, and he drove her to *Au Petit Moulin* in Old Greenwich. He had long ago stopped forbidding make-up, but he was glad that she wore almost none now. Without vivid coloring in her cheeks and lips, her lovely and wise young face had the texture of delicate porcelain. The modified bangs (apparently in teen fashion this season) were smartly parted, and the high, round forehead showed through, lending a virtuous frankness to the face. She jumped from subject to subject as he sipped white wine, though for some reason she skirted around the subject of the Donlin girl. She seemed particularly excited by the news, in yesterday's *Sun-Sentinel*, that *the* Monica Spencer had bought a house in Cameron and had announced she would be moving there within a month. Until this moment, Forbes supposed he had never really noticed the graceful line of his daughter's narrow nose, with the pleat beneath it meeting the full curve of the mouth that somehow no longer looked innocent.

"Monica Spencer?" he repeated. "Moving to Cameron? Did the paper say where?"

"Out in the Overridge section, somewhere. I don't remember the street."

"I wouldn't've thought the name Monica Spencer would mean much to you. She still makes pictures, but she's really from 'way back in my generation."

"Of course I know who she is. Her old movies are on television all the time," Nancy said. "She may be old now, but she must've been the most beautiful woman to ever be in the movies."

"Yes, I'll agree with that. Although she's not necessarily ancient, just because I said she's from my generation." They laughed. Forbes did indeed remember Monica Spencer, as a genuinely beautiful woman and a first-rate actress as well. She had made some pretty dreary pictures, he recalled, but she'd been given three Oscars, and probably deservedly so, because there was about her a vitality and a uniqueness that always said pure star.

"Well, not *old* old. Older, I mean. Why isn't she much in the movies any more, do you know?"

"I wouldn't have a clue, except for the stories about her that used to make the rounds—too much temperament, too

much liquor, too many boy friends. Anyway, none of it's our affair. Here comes Jacques. Let's have some of that vichyssoise you're so goofy about."

Suddenly, during dinner, Nancy said, "It was kind of spooky yesterday, talking to those policemen, trying to sleep last night. That's one of the reasons I'm happy you're back, Daddy: it sounds childish, but I sleep better when you're in the house. I tried to sleep and I kept seeing that poor, mousy Dorothy Jean. Her *poor* family. I wish I could do something for them. I wish I could've done something for her. I saw her just the day before yesterday, on Rutledge, for half a second. She acted as if she wanted to talk—she never did that before when we saw each other—but I was in a hurry. Maybe if I hadn't been in such a hurry . . ."

"You wouldn't have changed a thing," Forbes said, pretending he was certain.

"No, I guess not."

"Do you happen to know if Ira Cox is right, that there's no drug problem in the city schools?"

"I doubt if there's much of it going on, except pot, where I go, or in the other private schools. But that old Cox is lying in his false teeth, or he's senile, if he says that about the public schools, especially Cameron High. At least that's what the kids who go there tell me. They say you can buy anything there, right in the corridors, right in classes."

He wanted to ask her, point blank, if she had ever smoked pot, and he was sure he would get an honest answer. He didn't ask it. Instead, he asked, quietly, "Why do you think there's so much drugs now, baby?"

Nancy studied her thumb for a while. Then she said, "I certainly don't excuse it, any of it. But I think some kids trip out—go into the real hardware—because they don't have whatever it takes to say no to whoever invited them on. And maybe because they've been lied to."

"Who lied to them?"

She paused. "Grownups. The people they should have been able to trust. We had assembly this morning, and two policemen came and spoke to the whole school. I mean, it was stupid. Here were these two policemen telling us that drugs are bad for you. Okay, fine. But almost right from the beginning they lost just about everyone in that assembly, because they were dumb, and because they thought we were dumb. They said that if you light up one joint, you're on the road to becoming a dope fiend—that's the term they used, would you believe it, 'dope fiend.' They kept talking about

tripping out' on marijuana—you don't trip out, you turn on. They kept talking about marijuana addicts.' They said that Cameron Hospital and St. Agnes' Hospital have special wards where they have to keep 'marijuana addicts' locked up. That kind of talk is lying, and everyone knows it. They go to Cameron High and they say the same stupid lies. And there must be kids who think, 'If they lie to me about pot, then they must be lying about the other stuff, too.'"

She suddenly looked at her father, coolly almost accusingly, and she said, as though there was some special need to speak with cold emphasis: "That's what bothers lots of grownups about kids now. Kids now don't like to be lied to, about anything."

Abruptly troubled, Forbes heard himself ask, "Baby, do you feel I've lied to you, about anything important?"

The question obviously embarrassed her, and made her frown. "I wasn't referring to *you*. . . ."

"Why not? Why should I be an exception?" he said gently. "I was positive my father didn't understand a thing about me, and I was roughly ninety percent right." He touched her hand, and was further troubled that she instinctively pulled it away. "All of an uncomfortable sudden, princess," he said, "I have the feeling that something's bothering you, something personal. And maybe very important."

Nancy reddened. "Like what?"

"Like nothing, if it's truly not my concern, if it's something you're sure you can work out on your own. But you and I are in a special boat, baby. I'd never want our communication lines to break down."

Sharply brightening, not entirely successfully, his daughter said, "Nothing's bothering me except that I want to eat everything on this marvelous dessert menu. That's my one and only crisis. Honestly."

The remainder of the dinner and the rainy drive back to Rutledge Road were relaxed and pleasant, only slightly strained. Charlie Forbes deplored the dirty pictures that flashed across his mind, pictures of his daughter solving problems in secretive, cellar ways. He deplored them because they weren't even remotely justified.

He deplored them, and vowed to himself that there would be no more long-distance trips away from home, not for a while, perhaps not for a very long while.

4

Dinner conversation at the Byrons' on Carpenter Street, two miles east of Rutledge Road, was seldom conversation so much as noisy, ponderous speeches by Flip's father about anything and bickering between his father and mother about everything. Flip—Fred Byron, Junior—had learned to say little at dinner beyond, "Pass the rolls." His kid brother, Artie, hadn't yet learned that there was nothing to be gained by talking at the table, he still expressed thoughts and, of course, the old man either ignored him or barked that he was wrong. Their older brother, Howie, was in the Army, stationed in Honolulu. Howie, his father's redblooded American son, hadn't waited to be drafted; the klutz had enlisted, an act of manliness that still swelled Fred Byron's heart with pride.

The central topic of this rainy Friday evening's diatribe was Dorothy Jean Donlin. Flip ate his mother's Friday night slapdash stew and wondered idly what would happen if he were to get up and ram his sharp fork into his father's neck, whether he could hit the right vein that would kill him.

All the Donlin facts weren't known to the police, but Fred Byron, Senior, knew all the facts. "Her folks probably gave her a thousand a week allowance, everything under the sun on a silver platter, and told her to go be as free as she liked. That's why these kids get on this rotten dope. All they hear is they own the world, so why should they put on any brakes?" he orated. He was a muscular, ignorant, occasionally generous man with strong eyes and a fleshy face creased with the accumulation of fifty years of disappointment and discontent. He speared a sliced tomato with his fork and added, "You know where that dope comes from, don't you? Red China. I was reading about it." He was not talking much these days to Flip, even at the market, because of a week-long feud, one of the most serious ones yet, one nowhere near to be being resolved, so he aimed the tomato on his fork at Artie, who was eleven years old, and addressed him. "I ever find out anybody gives you one of those dope cigarettes, and you even *look* at it, I'll break you right in two with these bare hands, you hear me?"

"Oh, quit that kind of talk," their mother complained, her left cheek swollen with stew. "And let's finish up. My

program's on at seven thirty. Hazel'll be here at any minute."

"Quit *what* kind of talk?" Fred Byron, senior, thundered. "I want to bang this boy up right and all you got on your mind is that television crap, is that what—"

"I've warned you a hundred times: you curse once more in front of the children and—"

"You answer me! Where'm I wrong, trying to knock common sense into my kids so they'll end up right and straight? What's the name over on Ruddle Lane—Donald? Donnelly? If they'd a taken one second to knock a little common sense into *their* kid she wouldn't be layin' right this minute dead in the ice box on dope. Listen, I—"

Flip placed his paper napkin beside his plate and scraped his chair back, and stood and started out of the dining room.

His father: "Hey, there, you big shot, where you goin' without saying a word?"

His mother: "You see? You raise your voice so loud nobody wants to eat with you. Artie, I told you a hundred times: elbow *off* the table. Where were you brought up, in a barn?"

His father: "I asked you where you're going!"

Flip: "Out. I have some things to do."

He climbed the wide, creaking stairs of the eighty-year-old house, closed his bedroom door after him, with no real hope, phoned Nancy Forbes and suggested they take in a movie. Nancy thanked him but that was out, she said, her father had flown home from England today and they had just come back from dinner and they still had lots of things to talk about. "Next week sometime, though, maybe, Flip?" she offered.

"Sure. Say hello to your father for me."

He sat at the sturdy desk his father had built for him when he was Artie's age and considered going to the peace rally at the Unitarian Church. He decided against it; the old man would be sure to find out, and he hadn't the guts yet, to go to war with the old man on that score. He considered some basketball at Cameron High and turned that down as well, the cubes there riffed on only one thing: getting laid. He wanted to get laid, he guessed, but he was in no mood for hours of stupid talk about it. He had a paper to write for Monday's history class, but the hell with it, he'd knock it out on Sunday night.

What do I want?

I want out of this town, out of this family, out of this whole damned life. One month from today I'll be seventeen,

and nothing's happened to me. I want to bust out and do something big, so they'll know me.

So *I'll* know me.

Finally, restless, aimless, he phoned Mike Townes and suggested they go on a gash hunt Mike agreed. Mike always agreed; they never found any, nor did either ever seriously imagine they would, but it was a harmless enough way to kill a couple of hours. "I'll pick you up," Flip said, and replaced the receiver, and continued to sit for many minutes He considered calling Mike back to say he'd changed his mind Instead, he opened the desk's bottom drawer, dug through his collection of Europe travel folders, and retrieved the package of three Trojans that he'd bought a year ago and had not yet unwrapped.

The late April rain had let up slightly as Flip drove toward Mike Townes' street in the two-door Chevy that was coughing-old and cost too much for insurance, but was *his* car, something he'd wanted and paid every nickel for out of the money he'd saved from working after school and Saturday's at the old man's supermarket. The rain amused him, and he wondered how long Mike would take to face up to the joke: if there never was free gash strolling Cameron on nice nights, how much would be out on a night like this?

Flip Byron was tall and husky and fair, strong like his father, and something of a celebrity in Cameron, where he had been born for he excelled in many things. He had no particular passion for competitive sports, yet school year after school year he was Cameron High's baseball and basketball star. He suffered private tortures about speaking in public, yet every semester he entered school debates, and every semester his team won. He rarely studied, and the pursuit of learning for its own sake had never been stressed or encouraged in his home ("Money talks, big shot, not fancy college degrees"), yet his I.Q. was well above average and he invariably made the high honor rolls.

Cameron called him a Good Boy. A Good Boy to keep your eye on, a Good Boy who'll go far. Some parents regarded his parents as common (he was sure), but most of them trusted their daughters to go out with him, because he was a Good Boy.

Flip Byron *was* a Good Boy, and this knowledge frequently depressed him. He was aware that there were guys who thought of him as a round the clock stud, and he was aware, too, that there had been subtle and wide-open invita-

tions to prove it from some of the chicks he'd dated, but he was a virgin. He was a virgin because he could not bring himself to disbelieve girls like Nancy Forbes and Dona Shearer when they said no during the steamy petting sessions, and he could not bring himself to make it with willing stuff like Bobbi Cochran and Dolores Rooney, who put out for everybody and anybody.

Most of the kids he knew turned on. Mike Townes, another Good Boy, had once offered him a joint, and he'd smoked it. It made him sick. He suspected that Mike was sometimes into heavier equipment than grass. Acid, maybe. He never asked. Mike's big was Mikes.

People liked Flip, and it would have been easy to be popular, so many things for him were easy. But he was, essentially, a loner. He didn't enjoy traveling alone, yet the people he enjoyed traveling with were few. He knew there were people who were jealous of him and of what they called his accomplishments. He realized that he only partially understood why, for he was convinced that his accomplishments were fakes, that he was a fake.

Mike was waiting under the front awning of his apartment house on Belleview Avenue, and hopped into the Chevy. Mike was a bright enough guy, though he had to sweat his ass off to keep his grades up, and he was basically as lazy as Flip, although he tried harder to be liked. They were the same age, but he was smaller and more frail than Flip, and the glasses he had to wear, along with the wings of nearly shoulder length hair, gave him the unfortunate appearance of a family horny owl. "Morning," Mike said.

"Don't worry. We'd have to fight all the gash off with a club.

"Great by me."

They cruised, and, after a while, Mike mentioned the Dunlin kid. "How do you figure a thing like that happened?" he asked.

"She shot too much juice all at one time," Flip said.

"No, I mean *why*? That's freaky enough for someone our age who gets strung out. But what gives with thir*teen*?"

"It's the times."

"The what?"

"She got everything on a silver platter. Nobody took a minute to teach her values. That's why she's on the meat-hook now."

"What? Oh. Somebody's shuckin' somebody."

"Yeh," Flip agreed. "What the hell do I know about how

or why? All I know is that nobody knows anything. Everybody's an expert about everything, and nobody knows anything about anything."

"Wow, man, you're in a real sweet mood."

Flip nodded. "Right on. My old man and I had one of our famous hassles, just before I called you. He came at me with a butcher knife, and I grabbed it and shivved about six inches right between his shoulder blades. Left him bleeding on the carpet like a sonofabitch."

"Christ . . ." Mike murmured, and then saw the put-on. "You bastard," he said.

They checked into Phil's Bowl-A-Rama, and there was potential gash, but all dated up. They bowled two sets waiting for unescorted gash that did not come, and they left. They cruised until half-past nine, and then Flip drove back to Ballender. "I'd better go home now," he said. "I want to see if my mother got the blood out of the rug yet."

"You *are* a freaky bastard."

"Yeah. See you around," Flip said and let him off and headed reluctantly in the direction of Carpenter Street, and wondered why he hadn't thought to invite himself to Mike's pad for a Coke. Mrs. Townes would likely be there. He'd met Mike's mother a couple of times, and dug her. She was like no other mother he'd ever met. She was divorced. She didn't try to come on like she was his age, or his generation, but she looked and acted too young to be the mother of anyone over ten. She was a joy to watch as she walked across a room, and she talked sense, without ever talking down, as if she knew what it was to be going-on-seventeen, and Flip Byron would have died if she suspected, but he had a powerful case of the hots for her.

Slowing down at the West Street stoplight near City Hall, he recognized Georgia Twardesky standing alone, beneath the Strand Theater marquee. She wasn't standing so much as she was huddling, she had on a pink coat that looked wafer thin, its collar was up, her hands were deep in the pockets, her shoulders were hunched, and she kept shifting her slight weight from one foot to the other and then back again. Her lower lip jerked thus way and that, and obviously she was cold.

She might put out, and she was alone, and she did look damn cold, but Flip wasn't sure he wanted to pick her up. He knew her, slightly- she was a junior at Cameron High and he'd heard things about her and supposed he believed

some of them. She had a pretty Irish-Polack face and one of those lucky builds that was all angular and titless yet somehow managed to be sexy as she walked down the school corridors with that hard, narrow rump going tick-tock-tick from side to side. But the guys who knew, or said they knew, claimed she was stuff to stay the hell away from. The story went that she'd balled a black kid last year in the yard in back of her house, which was also her old man's saloon, out on the Five Points Road, and that she'd yelled rape when her old man caught them. Her father beat the living crap out of the kid, and she got a fat charge out of watching it all happen.

The light changed. Flip stopped at the Strand, and she saw him. "Need a lift?" he called.

She scampered in front of the Chevvy and slid in. She was smiling at him broadly, her teeth weren't good, but it was a lively smile. "Man, you showed up like right in the nick," she declared. "I'm wet all through. No buses this time of night, and I sure's hell don't have the bread for a taxi. Oh, man, this old bug's nice and warm and dry."

Flip drove up West Street. "Where are you heading?"

"Home. Five Points."

"I was afraid of that."

"Ah, what is it? Three miles."

"And bad roads when we get there."

"Well, it's not like there's a hundred foot of snow out, is there?"

"No."

"You turn left up here at the light and go toward Starbrook."

"I know."

"Oh, wow, it's late, and I gonna get my little ass kicked."

"It isn't even ten," he said. "Is that late?"

"With a bear of a dad like I got, sundown is late."

"What would you've done if I hadn't come along?"

"I don't know. I'd get home; I always do. Kuh-*rist*, but I'm wet. I didn't walk in that rain but two or three blocks and look how soaked I am. And to really make it a night, I got new stockin's on and I got runs in both of them. *Shit!*"

From the tail of his eye he saw her kick her shoes off, saw her pull the hem of her skirt back, and saw her roll her stockings down over her slender legs and bring them off her feet. "Excuse the strip tease," she grinned, and crumpled the stockings into her coat pocket, "but these stockings are making me feel all *crawly*."

"I don't mind a strip, especially if I'm wheeling you all the way to Starbrook." He found the nerve to add, "Take off anything you want."

"Yeah? You'll crash the car."

"I have a hundred and seventy-seven safe driver awards. Nothing fazes me while I'm behind the wheel. Try me."

"Well, it's the pants, mainly. They could be made out of Elmer's glue, the way they're stickin' to me."

His mouth became cotton. "Then take 'em off." He paused for several beats. "And let me see them."

"You don't beat around too much, do you?"

"No. Let's see them."

They were on Dalton Avenue, which was fairly dark and only dimly street lighted at this time of night. She slid forward, deep in the seat, and tugged and yanked, and victoriously held up a pair of panties that caught the light from outside and could have been satin, or even silk. "What are you, some kind of a pants nut? You want them for a souvenir?"

"Yeah. I'll hang them in my trophy room."

She giggled and stuffed them into his jacket pocket. "They're all yours. With my compliments to a wild chauffeur." She moved closer. "How come you and I never connected before this? I never beg why, but nobody ever sees you around."

"I keep busy. What're you doing out all by yourself?"

"Well, I had this thing tonight that—ah, what's the difference? I got wet. I went out for a nice time, and all I got was wet. Listen, I sure could use some bread to take home, real bad."

"Why?"

"You wanna bug me with questions? I need ten dollars before my old man reads the riot. Listen, doll, can you help out?"

"No. I don't have that much on me."

"How much? Five?"

He had twelve singles in his wallet, few of which he could spare. ". . . no. That's still a hunk of bread, Georgia."

"But you do have five you can lay on me. I mean, it's not like a *present*. I wouldn't just *take* it off of you and split. I'll pay it back. Monday."

They approached the grainery, near Five Points Road, and her hand was on his upper thigh, and she said, "Look, man, you let me have that five, dig?"

"There's a cathouse a half mile from here'll be nice to me

and call me Sir for five bucks," he said. He had heard about Stella's, but he did not know if she or it existed.

"Where? Stella's? Like hell they will for five. Or ten. Ten, maybe, but you'll wake up later with the clap, no extra charge. Listen, anyways, what's with this cathouse jazz, just because I asked you for the loan of a five? I play, but where'd I give you the idea I peddle? That *really* bugs me."

He parked off the road, and found WABC on the radio, and wondered why he was so unsure of himself, why he didn't just reach. There would not be a struggle, he was certain; she was sitting closer still, the smell of her perfume was straight dimestore but mind-dizzying, and he could see little more than outlines of her in the dark but the silent waves were telling him she was ready for anything. He began to touch her, and then he couldn't.

"Ah, is that on the level, what you were saying about your old man before?" he asked, trying for ease, nonchalance.

"Wha'? What was I sayin' about my old man before?"

"That he says sundown is late for you to come home."

She moved away—only an inch or two, but away. "Just about," she said flatly. "Who wants to rap about him? Screw him. We don't get along."

"How about your mother? How do you two do?"

No answer for a while, no sound at all except for the soft music and the soft drizzle. "You dig buttin' in, don't you?"

"I just asked how you and your mother get along. I'm interested."

Another pause. "She's dead now. She died when I was seven; her lungs went. You got any grass on you?"

"No."

"I'll show you a picture of her sometime, real good-lookin', retired lookin'. You think I got looks? She had twice my looks, three times. She came from the other side, right near Dublin, Ireland." Georgia lit a cigarette, a straight; the smoke smelled straight. "You know she was twenty-six when she conked out? Twenty-friggin'-six years old, and I've talked to people that knew her, and that shithead sonofabitch father of mine, he use'ta beat up on her. You don't wanna hear this stuff."

"Sure I do."

"Even when the doctor says she's gonna die, he beat up on her. And the worst was, she never got balled right. People didn't tell me that—how could they tell me that?—but I bet you anythin' you own the only time she ever got it was

when he felt like dropping a load, and I'll bet you anythin' it was always just in and out with him. . . .

"You know what I did?" she went on, slowly. "I started figurin' not too long ago, and what I figured was, maybe that'll happen to me. Maybe I'll climb in a car tomorrow and it smacks itself around a tree, and that's so long, Georgia. And you know who I'll start lovin' up with then? The ants and the rats. So I said, screw that bag. While I live, I live, you dig, Flip?"

She said it proudly, arrogantly. It came out sounding almost scared, almost sad.

When Flip Byron embraced her and kissed her mouth, he tasted her thrusting tongue, felt her arms tight around him, heard her breathe so hard that he began to go berserk with need. His hand moved unsteadily over her as WABC played Marrakesh Express, and she took his hand and guided it to where they both wanted it to be and placed it there. Too soon she drew back from the kiss and groaned and arched as his hand kneaded against her, and she hoarsely begged him to keep doing it, and then suddenly she urged in a voice that rattled, "Jesus Christmas, let's don't wait. . . ." He could not find the pack of Trojans easily in his pocket because she was quickly unzipping him and moving around and starting to carry on like some hysterical nut, spitting out dirty words, words without sweetness, but he did find the package and somehow unwrapped a rubber with all his thumbs, and she was squeezing him in her hot hand and croaking, "Wild, wild," and she rolled the rubber over him because he was taking too long, and he was surprised that it had not turned into dust, and he was so scared by this thing he was about to do for the first time that he was further surprised, amazed that he was staying hard.

Georgia sat on him and straddled him, her hands braced on the seat back, an expert, a pro, a piece quick enough, knowledgeable enough, pro enough to make it all as simple as possible, and he raised her raincoat and her dress high to get to her brassiere if she had one on, hoping it wouldn't have a complicated hook, vaguely sorry that she was so whorey-knowledgeable but only vaguely, glad that his first piece was experienced, not someone like Nancy Forbes who wouldn't know how to make it all simple, which would mean two dummies instead of one. Georgia wiggled and zigzagged until he was part of the way in, and she drawled, "Man, that's a baseball bat, you'll wreck me for good," and churned some more, stubbornly, so forcefully that she let

out a small yip that told him he was hurting her, and then she had him securely inside, and she did it too fast—what the hell was her hurry?—but she suddenly stopped moving as his fingers worked inside the bra and held her little breasts, and she said, too calmly, like an instructor, "Don't start yet. Rough me up a little, first."

What did that mean? He waited for further instructions, feeling like a small kid being taught something important by a teacher he didn't like.

"Man, man, man . . ." she said, but not really to him, to Flip Byron. "Squeeze 'em, man, hard," she said.

"I'll hurt you."

"That's what I want." He squeezed, and she gasped pain and said, "Mmmmmmp-pp. Yeah," and he stopped and she said, "Keep goin'. Hurt me good."

"Find another cat for that. Not me," he said, wondering if they were all sickies like this when they were doing it wondering if it *was* sick, wondering if he understood anything.

"Then start movin' real, real slow, okay?" she said, and he did. "Yum. Yummm-mm. Oh, you're something else, you're great wreck me. Say you love me, okay?"

He didn't understand that, either. He said nothing.

She began to slowly wiggle again. "Please, man, say it, it makes it like more personal when you talk to me. Say, 'I love you, Georgia.' Not that you dig me or you wanna hump me, don't talk dirty . . . I mean, talk how you want, just say, 'I love you, Georgia,' like that. You don't have to mean it. Please."

He tried, and couldn't.

The erection disappeared, nearly as fast as it had grown.

He tried to speak, tried to will it hard, and could do neither. And he was humiliated, and positive she would be mad, or, worse, that she would spread the word around that Flip Byron, the superstud, couldn't keep it standing.

He tried again. Desperately he tried again, and he failed, and she was all whorey-talk again. "Hey, Oscar's hiding in the bushes. What happened in the batter's box, doll?"

"Nothing. Let's quit," he said, and lifted her off him.

"Christmas, I said something wrong."

"No."

"I talk too much."

"It's all right."

"What did I say?"

"You didn't say anything. Point out your road and I'll drive you there."

"Like hell you will. Leave me off home feeling like two cents, where I don't even know what got you bugged?" She evidently sensed in the dark that he was bringing the Trojan off, for she quickly held him in her hand and she said anxiously, with more passion but a different kind from a few minutes before, "So you lost this for a couple seconds, so what, big deal, I'll get the fire lit up again and we'll have a real wild blaze. You can't go home from Georgia with a load like this."

Her head dipped, but he stopped her. "No. Forget it," he said, and started the motor, and drove. House lights and a few street lights were on as they neared her home. She seemed desperate to know what she had done wrong. "Nothing," Flip said. "I just wasn't in the mood, I guess."

At the top of the road that led to her house and her father's gin mill, Georgia asked to be let out. "When my old man sees me in a car, he right away thinks I was out gettin' banged," she said. Before she opened the car door, she looked at Flip, hard, as if she might be able to read what was wrong in his face. "You want to know something?" she said. "Sometimes I act like I'm tough; sometimes that's how I act. I'm not like that, no ways. You believe me?" He nodded. "Whatever I did or said that I shouldn't'a, I'm—sorry. You believe me?" He nodded again.

She opened the door, but didn't get out. "*Will* you lay a little bread on me?" she quietly pressed. "I hate to ask but like I honest to God really need it."

Flip opened his wallet and found himself handing her all twelve singles.

"Wow, thanks, doll. I'll pay you back, honest. Uh—would you hit me if I asked one more thing?"

"Like what?"

"Would you just kiss me, Flip?"

He did. It was a kiss he didn't feel, but he kissed her. At last she stepped out of the Chevvy, and stood for a moment, and said before she shut the door, "If you call me up sometimes, I promise I won't do anything or say anything wrong. I promise. Hope to die."

Flip Byron drove home to Carpenter Street. He hoped that his parents would be asleep, or at least quieted down. The Buick wasn't in the garage when he got there, and he remembered, with quick relief, that this was the first Friday

in the month. On the first and third Fridays of every month the old man met his cronies over at Castle Hall on Bridge Street for a Carl Keene Fellowship meeting. The Carl Keene Fellowship was made up of two dozen old men from this section of Fairfield County, and it was, in the words his father had memorized, "A one hundred percent patriotic organization, dedicated to the principles of Americanism."

It was. It was also a sanctuary where crybaby misfits like Fred Byron, Senior, could get together like real men twice a month and chug beer and roll decent words like *commie* and *kike* and *coon* and *spic* and *long-hair hippie draft dodgers* over their patriotic tongues.

All that mattered was that Flip would be able to miss seeing him. One week before, he had finally told his father at a mid-morning shootout that he had no intention of going into the business; he would go on working there on Saturdays and after school, until school was done, but he had other plans for his life. The old man had roared with hurt and rage, and maybe that was understandable; he had single handedly built the grocery from a hole in the wall to a thriving supermarket. The old man was still sore. But, then, the old man had been sore about anything and everything for fifty years.

Flip's mother and her one friend, Hazel Brundage, were in the living room, zombied to the television and holding coffee cups and eating cake. They watched television together every night, one evening here, the next evening at Hazel's, while they ironed or mended or set their hair. They had once read in *TV Guide* that *Truth or Consequences* was about to be taken off the air, and they had spent five full evenings writing letters of protest to Channel 5, signing their names and names they took from the Cameron telephone directory.

Flip helped himself to a gob of the cake, the Sara Lee stuff his mother was hooked on and damn near mainlined. He stood as he ate, and watched Monica Spencer, twenty-five or thirty years old and a knockout, glare at George Sanders and say, "You want to own me, body and soul."

"This is where she slaps his face," said Hazel Brundage.

"Yes," said his mother.

George Sanders said, "I've never been particularly preoccupied with your soul, pet," and Monica Spencer slapped his face. Then she stepped back, and the hot indignation went out of her, and she cocked a haughty, regal eyebrow, and

said, slowly, coldly, "I've had quite enough of you. I'm leaving."

A cat food commercial came on, and the two ladies relaxed, freed for sixty seconds, maybe longer. "Whoever did her hair did it all wrong, if you ask me," Hazel Brundage declared, munching her Sara Lee.

"But isn't she *gor*geous!" his mother exclaimed, and from her coffee cup, "How old did *TV Guide* say this movie is—ten years old? Well, she must've been forty then because she's supposed to be fifty now, or older, but isn't she just beautiful!"

"'Aristocratic and impeccable, as always,'" Hazel Brundage read, "is what *TV Guide* calls her here. She still shouldn't have her hair long like that. But she looks nice, yes. I wonder what she looks like in real life, though, especially now. All that drinking and carrying on she's supposed to do . . . if you ask me, I'm not too thrilled she's moving to Cameron. Live and let live, I always say, but her type we could do without, thank you."

His mother glanced up at him. "Where were you?" she asked. "It's raining out. Did you wear your rubbers?"

The movie came on again, and she and Hazel Brundage tensed for it, and Flip said, "Well, I wore one."

She wasn't listening. He went upstairs.

He tuned the movie in on the ancient portable he'd picked up second hand and adjusted the rabbit ears until some of the snow receded, and waited, testicles hurting, furious with himself for not having just tuned Georgia out and let her finish him off, equally furious that for some dumb reason he would never fathom he had given her all his cash.

Monica Spencer was on the small screen, in full control of it. He had seen her other old movies, or some of them, but he gave this one special attention because there had been a story in the *Sun-Sentinel* the other day that she had bought the Kirschner's white elephant estate on East Bank Road. His mother was right: she *was* gorgeous, she *was* beautiful with a rich, elegant voice, a wild shape, and stag movie eyes.

The eyes, he guessed, were what held him most, throughout the crappy plot and the million commercials. Maybe she was an old valise now, but there on the tube she was young and perfect, so much woman that she was here in his bedroom with him, wearing that low-cut gown and dancing in a big ballroom with Walter Slezak, but here with him, Flip Superman Byron. Monica Spencer was in his bed

now, digging him, and she finished for him, very quickly, what Georgia had not finished.

Bust out, he thought when it was done and he was still furious. Bust out, soon, so everybody will know who you are.

5

Monica Spencer had her agent and business manager, Billy Gillette, sell her Hollywood Hills house, and found a house for her in Connecticut, because she was terrified.

The terror had built slowly, gradually, intermittently over the past year but, once recognized for precisely what it was, there was no option but to cut every tie and flee, with some wistful confidence that the terror would not follow her to the East.

Much of the story she and Billy gave to the press was accurate, for Monica and most reporters had always been friendly, and they had come to expect honesty, or its reasonable facsimile, from her. Billy summoned the press to her poolside on a sunny Tuesday afternoon, and the majority of those invited went, because the liquor invariably flowed generously and because Monica, who hadn't made a picture in a year but who was still top dollar, always came through with plenty of color and zip. Radiant, immaculate, and pretending to be relaxed, she greeted them that afternoon in a simple black blouse and black slacks, enjoying their enjoyment of her half-berserk figure, and she knew and chatted with most of them by their first names. She personally saw that the bar was kept busy, and she sat near the high board and smoked and elaborated on why she was getting out.

"I could have gone on about the intolerable smog in the physical and cultural atmosphere," she began, "—no, wait, I'd better not knock the culture in L.A.; all the topless waitresses will be insulted . . . I'd've stayed if any script I read since I did *Live the Moment* could have kept me awake past the fifth page. It's that simple: the offers come in every week, but no one seems able to figure how to cast these old bones. The bulk of pictures being made today are for kids, by kids. I still look good, but not yummy enough to star on a motorbike or a pot party beach blanket. The camel's back broke a few weeks ago when someone sent me a script that would've had me play a kind of hip Ma Kettle. I wasn't shocked—you know I never learned how to be shocked—

but I *did* win me three Oscars, and I've saved my money, and I'm not about to cap my career as next year's Majorie Main."

"What kind of picture would you come back to do?" the *Herald-Examiner* asked.

Impishly, because they would like the answer and because it would of course not see print, she lighted a cigarette and extinguished the match with a brisk jerk of the wrist and pompously replied. "My life story, of course. It would be called, 'Down To the She in Sips.'"

The laughter was quick and, here and there, just a little over-the-shoulder nervous, but she got away with the line because she was Monica Spencer, the original open book kid, the eternally beautiful kid who would soon be forty-seven years old, a star for thirty of them and still a star, who had done *Medea* and screwball comedies with equal brilliance, who had never seriously denied that she checked into hotels as Mrs. To-Whom-It-May-Concern, who could say and do scandalous things and be forgiven and loved for it because she was always herself, never false.

"But while I'm holding my breath for that epic to start rolling," she added, easily, "I'm going to contemplate my rhinestoned navel in New England, where I spent some happy times. Southern Connecticut's close enough to my friends in New York, but removed enough for me to work on the autobiography I promised a New York publisher long, long ago."

"Will you use the same title on the book as the one for the movie?" asked the Associated Press.

"No, I'm considering something a bit racier and more provocative. Anyway, I'm looking forward to becoming a country squiress. It's time for me to settle down and get to know myself."

"By 'removed enough,' do you mean you plan to be a lady hermit?" asked a trade paper, a very young man with a bush of hay colored hair and a carefully combed goatee, a new young man whose name she had not got

"Sweetie, I'm moving to New England, not the Seven Storey Mountain. I don't intend to be a hermit, and at this stage of the game I certainly don't have any plans to start being a lady." More laughter, safer and printable.

They liked her, even the women, and they didn't want the afternoon to end. When the unexpected and inexplicable shakiness began and threatened to bubble up and go out of control unless she ran and hid, she explained that she had

to leave, and suggested that everyone stay to swim, or drink up all the liquor, or repair with the opposite sex to the gardener's cottage for the purpose of carnal study, or all three, if they chose, simultaneously. She thanked them all and glided back into the house, alone, just in time.

In her sunlit bedroom, all satin and ivory antique, she greedily washed the day's second potent tranquilizer down with a potent shot of straight, hairy-chested Metaxa, and paced, her hands and body cruelly trembling, and waited for the trembles to recede.

The conference had gone well, she decided –at least no one had sneaked up from behind and demanded the whole truth. She stripped off her clothes because she was perspiring, and she caught sight of her reflection in the full-length mirror and paused to regard, both dispassionately and guiltily, the picture of Miss Dorian Gray. The tall, erect body was unsagged, the skin smooth, the shoulders proud, the belly flat; everything was as it had been at twenty, almost, including the aesthetically jarring but good humored bosom. The face wasn't twenty, but it was light years away from a date with the plastic surgeon's cleaver. The brown eyes were alert and clear, incredibly, in spite of all the years and all the periodic romances with hard drugs and longer ones with booze: frank eyes from which sparkled two bright points of light, even when she felt not at all bright: observant and intelligent and let's-screw eyes that sold the tickets and kept the boys courting

The mirror showed her everything but her soul. Which was just as well.

Helpless, desperate minutes passed, and the brandy wasn't working its magic, and the pill needed more time than she had to give it, and it was only three-thirty and her session with Doc McShrink wasn't till six. She paced the vast bedroom, increasingly trapped and fearful, dressed in a man's *(which man's? Robert? No, Marc. No, that's right, Robert)* Jermyn Street white shirt, the tail of which was long and went below her knees, and she stood at the window that looked down onto the pool and the people. Most of them had gone, or appeared to be on their way, but some lingered, four men and one woman, drinking and laughing at something, and she looked at them and they didn't see her.

Doc McShrink's month ago ultimatum, unusually stern for such a usually passive, usually silent analyst: 'Our treatment stops as of this sesion, Monica, unless you give us both your word that the sex stops and the drinking stops. You're

in treatment for a number of reasons, but the central one is that you haven't found a way to channel your destructive impulses. If you keep acting them out—and the mindless, faceless sexualizing heads the list—and then keep coming here to wallow in them, then I'm just taking your money and we're taking each other's time, because I can't help you."

Monica: "Okay. I'll behave."

She stood at the side of the window and observed the very young goatee from the trade paper.

Doc McShrink: "There's a profound difference between ***acting out and acting upon."***

Monica: "I adore the way you read those fortune cookies." The very young man glanced up and saw her. None of the others did.

Doc McShrink, the Judge Hardy of the subconscious: "You drift from one bed to another, and you do it without enjoyment, without feeling anything except inadequacy, with anticipation and acceptance of defeat. Each failure confirms ***those feelings of inadequacy."***

Monica: "Is that why we sisters of Sigma Chi Nympho do what we do: to prove how sick we are?"

Doc McShrink: "Nymphomania is a word. There's no such thing as oversexed or undersexed, there's just a lack of sexual balance. You're too special a person, Monica, and you have too much potential for genuine, mature growth to ***be living this formlessly."***

She beckoned to the very young man to come to her, pointed to her wrist watch and held up five fingers, and pointed downward and to the left, where the door was that she wanted him to enter. She then pressed a finger to her lips.

Luck happened. His nod was swift and conspiratorial.

Monica undid Roberts shirt buttons, rubbed Calendre into her skin, and buttoned only the shirt's third and last buttons again. Then she brushed her silken black hair, cold hands remarkably a trace steadier, and waited for the very young man who, if luck stayed with her, would tender her a quick, medicinal spasm and, if luck continued to hold out, would simply, with philanthropy completed, go home.

She waited, and poured more of the normally lethal Metaxa that refused to do its job today, and hoped, as she had hoped all these dangerous weeks, that the move east with her housekeeper Brigid and no one and nothing else, would indeed make the difference, would indeed save her. She waited and remembered her last time in the East, June second, four years before.

But this time it would be entirely different. Four years before, wounds raw and infected, she had done something she would never do now, perpetual terror and all . . .

Four years before, the last lap of her grueling *Live the Moment* promotion tour had taken her to New York, one day before her birthday. No one, including herself, believed she was all of forty-three, ten years younger, just possibly, but not forty three, and Curt and Jan Oakes, who had held her hand during her last and least tidy divorce, and whom she loved, organized a mammoth party for her in their Beekman duplex in less than a day.

In the Jean Louis that had miraculously arrived that morning at her St. Regis suite, she swept into her seams-bursting party filled with good friends and the good friends of good friends, and the hordes gathered her unto them and she was majestically happy as she received and gave kisses. With one titanic bourbon and rocks after another in her hand, she moved about the sitting room, stopping to chat, stopping to listen, enjoying herself, glowing, her mind bell-clear and her beauty never more inexhaustible, sensing precisely when to push on and yet sight no one, moving effortlessly between waves that automatically parted for her in this crowded room. She finished each bourbon minutes after it was served her, and another one was quickly brought.

Jan and Curt introduced her to the gushing guests who were the friends of friends, and she was gracious and effusive for them. For an hour she ambled to and from knots of friends and worshippers and ex-lovers and their current wives, babbling with a contagious animation that proclaimed that nothing on earth could daunt her, ever. The combo was playing *Just One of Those Things*, and her face lighted up and soon she silenced a portion of the hordes by loudly singing the number, making up in joy and spirit what she decidedly lacked in skill. She curtsied grandly at the wild applause, and laughed with them, and took a sip from her drink, and walked to the terrace doors with a young, puppy-dog male starlet who asked if he might see her while she was in New York.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asked, her voice and her eyes serious and direct. "Will you take me to my hotel?"

An almost visible gulp. ". . . Yes. Of course."

"Will you go back and find my drink? I'll be on the terrace."

The terrace was empty of people. The evening was warm.

The river was a steel gray mirror, veiled deeply in shadow. Fingers of light stretched out from somewhere to track zigzags of yellow lines in the water, but the shadows as quickly swallowed them up. Entirely sober, her mind still bell-clear, she poised on the railing for only seconds and jumped from the eighth floor terrace of Curt and Jan Oakes' duplex apartment.

For many days, she and the Angel of Death shared a private room in a fashionable, discreetly anonymous East Side hospital, at times cozy with each other, then vigorously contesting to see which of them would get out of bed first. When she was able to listen and to hear, a Dr. Griswold, a black man with an aura of gentle, unsmiling authority, told her why she was still alive and catalogued her injuries. Her fall had been broken by shrubbery she'd landed on and a balcony she'd rolled onto three floors beneath the Oakes' terrace. She had fractured her spine, which paralyzed her body from her neck down. With Billy Gillette's written release, a general surgeon named Myerberg had removed her ruptured spleen and a neurosurgeon named Chancelor had eased the pressure of her spine from against its cord. There were additional multiple internal injuries, and her bladder and bowel functions were being closely watched.

Her head was held rigid in an enormous plaster cast right out of *The Mummy's Daddy*, but pain, which she had never tolerated well, was only moderate. "When did all these goodies happen?" she asked Dr. Griswold.

"You were in shock for thirty hours. Dr. Myerberg operated within an hour after you came out of shock. Dr. Chancelor operated the next day. You've been here for six days."

"That sounds fair enough. What's your first name, Doctor?"

He blinked. "Asa."

"Would you be a darling and do something for me, Asa? Would you hire a good catering service and a jazz band to be here at nine? I'm having a few hundred close friends in and I'm just dying to put on my dancing shoes."

Because it was inevitable, the word leaked and then flooded to Hollywood and the East Coast insiders that she had purposely set out to do herself in, but Billy Gillette put his boys to work, and what the public learned, and believed, was that Monica Spencer, the life lover, had accidentally fallen. They believed this because they wished to. They loved winkingly wicked Monica Spencer, who always came home

triumphant from wars with alcohol, messy marriages, messier love affairs, successful but sometimes bad movies—not a *wholesome* woman, certainly, you understand, but stunning, and witty, and human, and, most of all, a battler who would never be defeated, let alone bullied. They believed the accident, for Monica was larger and lovelier and livelier than they, but in some ways themselves, the extension of the dream, and if she fell apart and wilfully died in front of them, then what was left, where was hope?

Billy flew her back to California after three weeks in the discreet hospital—sweet, fat Billy who didn't press her excessively about how she had really managed to step over the high wall of a terrace. He suggested she look into the psychoanalysis she had been promising for a year or so to look into, and she said she would, one of these days, and that was the end of it. Recovery took half a year. Complete physical recovery took nearly two years. During that time, in Holmby Hills and on deadly sea cruises with mother-hen Brigid that she let herself be talked into, she did not drink, and she avoided those West Coast friends and lovers who had unwittingly contributed, in some way she refused to examine, to her impulsive dive off the East Coast terrace. Money was scarcely a worry. She had spent, wasted, large sums of it over the years, but she owned large sums of it now and would for the remainder of her life, because Billy had guided her wisely and invested for her wisely. There was abiding comfort in the fact that she was no has-been that she would never have to go scratching for a job: Hollywood knew this, and the public knew it, and, most importantly, she knew it. She read a lot. And watched the sea, and pondered, and worked to make herself whole.

When she was strong again, and looking and feeling younger and healthier than ever, she agreed to make *Letter to Lora* for Jack Wendell, a director she trusted. The script was tight, and her part had the kinds of high voltage scenes that had led to all three Oscars, and there was a ninety-day shooting schedule and the guarantee of a thousand dollars for every day she would have to work beyond that. Making the picture wasn't much fun because, she knew, she wasn't much fun—the absence of drinking and serious or transient lovers were the culprits, and she was frequently annoyed by the self-imposed abstinence yet determined to keep it up—but she worked better than she had in years.

On the evening of the day *Letter* was finished, twelve working days over schedule, she went to Jack Wendell's

house in Coldwater for a celebration party, because to have declined would have been to snub Jack, the picture, and the good people connected with it. She asked for a sissy rum collins, prepared to nurse the bejesus out of it, and liked it, and in the middle of her sixth or seventh or eighth drink she left the party to slip outside, alone, to breathe air and elude the demons waiting to pull her back into chaos. She stood near the pool, watching the moon on the restless water, and Archie Kenner, the picture's head cameraman, came to her with grass he guaranteed was the season's choicest, and Monica shrugged and said sure, why not? They drove to the beach and they wrapped themselves inside the blanket Archie took from the trunk of his MG, and she was giddily alarmed by how fast she responded to the weight of him, the fact of him.

"Where've you been?" Archie asked, and she recognized what he meant.

"Nowhere, limbo," she answered. "Now I'm somewhere."

Archie Kenner's grooves were restricted to grass and one-to-one balling, but he knew of a new action group that had sprung up in North Hollywood during her ascetic holiday, a cult for the non-cultish that specialized in you name-it. The lead guru had the marvelous 1926 name of Doctor Shadow (nee Sweeney) and the growing number of Friday night parishioners was made up of important and circumspect names in town who evidently weren't afraid that the press or the fuzz might catch up with them. He mentioned some important and circumspect names. Monica begged off. "I've had all the innings I want to handle with anything rougher than cocoa, and I'd hate to make a formal religion of fancy undressed balls. Do you know what kick I'm really look for, Arch? A boy friend. A Rhett Butler beau who sends me Valentines and takes off his socks before we hit the sack because he respects me."

"You really are from the weirds," laughed Archie, who was not that season in the market for a girl friend, especially a notoriously unzipped one. "Maybe you can meet him at Doctor Shadow's."

"You've saved my life again, Ann Landers," she drawled, and forgot the conversation.

Until a few days later, when she bumped into Sigrid Loban at the Vine Street Derby. Sigrid, a few years older than Monica and a star for nearly as long, had been an Austrian bathing beauty contest winner whom Von Groeter had rescued from Hitler, brought to Hollywood and de-

veloped into a good, often excellent, actress. Monica asked her about Doctor Shadow, and Sigrid bubbled that the cult-religion was indeed real and thriving, and she described its myriad virtues as her luncheon date agent hopped celebrity tables. "I would've been after you to pay a visit long before this," Sigrid added, "but the message has been out that you were taken suddenly celibate."

"Phone me the next time there's a prayer meeting, will you, Sig?"

Sigrid Teban did, and Monica induced Archie Kenner to escort her.

That had been a year ago. Now Doctor Shadow was after her; they were all after her. The only escape was . . . escape.

The very young man with the carefully combed goatee entered the house through the study where he would not be seen by Brigid or the servants, and Monica, at the top of the stairs, called, softly, "Hey."

She preceded him into the bedroom and closed the door. "Two questions I'm going to ask will make you furious," she said, her tone calm and businesslike, as if he had been summoned to give her a cost estimate on painting her house. "The first is, what's your name? I heard it when we met downstairs, and I promised to remember it, but I'm afraid it got lost among the other new names I heard. My name is Monica Spencer."

"Oh, so *you're* Monica Spencer. Mine's Don Brock." She noticed a bulge in his cream-colored slacks that had not been there before, and knew that the first hurdle had been successfully leapt. "What's the second question that'll make me furious?"

She unbuttoned the shirt's third button with her left hand, and the last button with her right, and asked, "Would you please tell me all the interesting things you did at camp as a boy?"

Luck, oh the splendid luck . . . He was startled, but he didn't laugh or disintegrate, nor was there any indication that he was about to throw tiresome questions at her. He held her and gently kissed her mouth and less gently kissed her breasts. But he appeared to be in no hurry, and so Monica, quickened and trembling harder, tore at his jacket and his belt, and she pulled him to the wide bed so quickly that he still wore his shirt and his shoes. He sat up, frowning, and said, "I have a train to catch, too, but it won't leave for another thirty seconds."

Monica resented and appreciated his refusal to obey her, and she smiled and nodded and let go. She waited until he came to her and asked, in good-humored sarcasm, 'Shall we call a disc jockey show and request 'Paradise'?"

He was in his late or middle twenties, with an athlete's hard, tight body and the same kind of small, round, dark birthmark on the head of his penis that Billy Gillette had. He would not rush, but he obviously understood that he had been invited here to hail her, not romance her, and too soon after he began he muttered that he would do his best to pace himself, with no conviction in his hoarse voice that he would be able to, and it happened for him immediately, before Monica was ready, but his erection stayed and she moved against his otherwise lifeless body until it—not it, but something—happened for her, as well. They lay together, motionless and silent for several minutes and then, in a monotone, Monica said, "Adam and Eve are the talk of their friends."

"What?"

"Adam and Eve are the talk of their friends."

"Oh."

She watched him dress, only dimly fulfilled but grateful that, at least for the moment, the snakes had diminished. "I'm glad I left the sports page in Des Moines to come out West," he said finally. "I meet such interesting people."

"Such thankful people," Monica amended the sheet at her throat.

"May I see you again?"

"No."

A glance of fleeting irritation. "That seems to call me a curb service stud."

"No. It calls me a not very nice woman who lives above a vacant lot. Don't think bad thoughts about me. I hate it when a good man thinks bad thoughts about me."

Presently she was alone. At six, she would be to Doc McShrink, as she had lied since his quiet, grave ultimatum, about the booze and the bennies and the downers and the trade papers with the carefully combed gooters. What a cumbrous and wicked joke, she thought: desperate trips to the analyst to lie to him, to exclaim "See what a good girl I've been!" and bathe in his blessings.

He still wasn't in favor of her decision to leave California and treatment; he had warned her that all unsolved problems would travel with her, no matter where she went or for how long.

But then he didn't know about Doctor Shadow. So the joke was on him, right?

Her phone was ringing as she emerged from the shower, and she picked up the receiver because no one else in the house was answering it (where was Brigid, damn her? where for that matter was the goddamn houseboy?) and because the ringing went on and on. "Yes," she snapped.

"Hello, Monica."

The terror knifed through her.

"I told you never to call me," she whispered, and brought her arm across her breasts hiding the abruptly stiffened nipples.

"We expect you here tonight, Monica. You've been a disappointment to me, but you'll come here tonight and all, or some, will be forgiven."

She dropped the live coal of a receiver onto its cradle and toweled herself dry and dressed as swiftly as she could because it was necessary to get away at once. She opened the bedroom door and called to Brigid Carmody, who came soon, and ordered her to contact the telephone company, the first thing in the morning, and have the number changed.

"Again?"

"Yes goddammit, *again*. And tell Lon to bring the car around right away."

"But you have a good half hour before—"

"Don't *but* me, you cow's ass! Get out of here and do as you're told and earn your salary!"

Lon drove her to the analyst, and on the way she rolled both rear windows down and took the foul air deep into her lungs so that she would not cry, or scream.

The analyst was wrong, and she was right. In Connecticut, she would make it. In Connecticut, where she would resist every sinful appetite and temptation, she would become, at long, weary, painful last, the woman Doc wanted her to be, the woman she needed to be. In Connecticut, she would look up instead of down. Redemption waited there, silken peace, and in her mind she could see and almost touch all its forms, beginning with the blue lake, always beginning with the inevitable blue lake and the white, stately balustrade. And down the garden swathe, on each side, were the flowers of all seasons, the freshest sun and sea and star dipped flowers. And then, beyond the balustrade and lake, the snow-capped mountains, green at the bottom like a simple hill is green, then purpling upward as the individual trees turned

into forest, but a forest that was virgin and trackless, Monica's forest.

"Or else," she whispered. "Or else."

6

For several days after Dorothy Jean Donlin's death, Fran Townes traveled from home to office to home again in an intermittently black depression, at times convinced beyond all logic that, had she taken it upon herself to bend a C.C.S. rule, she might have been able, somehow, to save the child.

Fran Townes was a psychiatric case worker at Cameron Community Service on West Street. The Saturday morning before, Nettie, who ran the switchboard, had buzzed her between appointments and reported, "There's a girl out here, twelve, thirteen years old, and she says she wants to talk to someone about a personal matter. She won't give her name, won't say anything else. What do we do?"

"Send her in. I'm free for a few minutes." The girl could have been twelve or thirteen, or fifteen or sixteen; she was small and fragile, with straight, dark, lifeless hair and outsize eyeglasses that almost obliterated her face. She wore a clearly expensive fur coat. She looked at Fran's desk, rather than at Fran, who sensed deep trouble, and she said, in a voice as lifeless as her hair, that she had a certain problem that had to be kept private and had to be solved, and announced that she had money and could pay, but she would not tell her name or where she lived or where she went to school, and she would not discuss her certain problem unless she was given full assurance that her family would never know she was coming here. Fran explained the rule against treating any adolescent except with parents' permission, and, preferably, involvement in the treatment. The girl mumbled that this was impossible.

"Can you tell me anything?" Fran pressed, gently.

"No. Not unless you promise that it's all going to be private." A flick of life came into her tiny voice. "Is it the money you're worried about? I can *pay* you!"

Fran asked if she would phone in an hour or so, and gave her a card. The girl agreed, and left. Fran buzzed Ben Hoff, C.C.S.'s administrative head, and went to his office when he had a moment, and told him about the girl. "Some-

thing's very wrong; she's very uptight about something," she said. "I'm booked to the gills, but I can fit in some time. Let me see her, Ben."

"No. No, because there are a dozen reasons because, and you know them all."

The girl phoned, and Fran told her there was no way to help her without her family's consent, and hoped she could persuade her to talk with her family about an appointment. The girl hung up.

The girl was Dorothy Jean Donlin. Five days later, Fran saw her picture on the front page of the *Sun-Sentinel*.

Fran Townes was old enough and experienced enough to have graduated successfully from being a letter-of-the-jargon-law worker to a therapist who leavened her trained skills with compassion, who was interested in clients as people first and case numbers second.

She had lived, for the past ten years, with her son, Mike, and their jewel of a housekeeper and friend, Violet Curtis (still and always "Mrs. Curtis," despite sixteen years), in a six-room garden apartment on Bayshore Avenue, which was situated approximately halfway between Cameron's tenement area and the affluent Overridge section. Her CCS salary was adequate, if scarcely more than inadequate. She worked because she was good in her profession, and because she was not married; she and Brandy Townes had been separated for sixteen years, and divorced for most of those.

Fran Townes' face was moderately free of angles and, at first view, unmemorable, yet it was a very pleasant face that became prettier the longer one looked. She had an excellent body, for forty-one, absurdly youthful body, with small, high, pregnant breasts, narrow waist, and tapering thighs and legs. Her turquoise eyes were set slightly aslant beneath naturally yellow hair, and on this day, on her way to Manhattan to be one of the panelists on a television show about teenagers and narcotics, she looked particularly fit. A week ago she had returned from a four-day psychotherapists' conference in, of all unlikely and inspired settings, Bermuda. There, at every possible moment that she dared to steal away from the conference, she had broiled deliciously under Somerset's unseasonably ardent sun, and it had bleached her hair to an even richer yellow and given her skin a golden glow.

On the 3:41 to Grand Central she crossed her legs and read over notes she would consult surreptitiously during

the taping. At the Port Chester stop, a pleasant man in his forties, with good tweeds and a good haircut and a wedding band, sat in the seat beside hers. They smiled at each other, and Fran returned to her notes. Minutes after the train left Port Chester, the man offered her a cigarette, which she politely refused, and she politely rebuffed his attempts to chat until shortly before New Rochelle, when she decided she was being rude. She hadn't all that much preparation to do for the ad lib show, and there was nothing about him that said Jack the Ripper, so she smiled and asked what time it was.

They talked easily enough—his name was Walker Walters, he was in insurance, and they discovered that each of them had seen the Calder exhibit at the Guggenheim and that each of them had been in Lucerne in the same month three summers ago—and, soon after the 125th Street stop he suggested they have a drink at the Oyster Bar in Grand Central.

She thanked him and said she had much too much to do in the city and couldn't possibly. She half waited for him to ask if he might phone her some time. He didn't. He was friendly for the remainder of the ride, and they walked up the terminal's ramp together, and he wished her well and went on in the direction of the taxi stand.

Fran stood alone at a bookshop window in the station because the taxi stand was where she planned to go and she wanted to give him time to get his cab and get away. She would not, of course, have gone to even a safe and public place like the Oyster Bar with a man she didn't know . . . yet why not, she asked herself. A highball—one, because she did have a legitimate appointment with a mature, literate man, might have led somewhere. It might have led to a later meeting, perhaps after the refined passage of a few days or a week, in an anonymous hotel, and the beginning and then development of a discreet affair that either of them could realistically conclude at any time because he had a Port Chester wife and children. What would have been wrong with it?

Everything, Fran decided, and left the shop and walked toward the studio on Madison Avenue instead of seeking out a taxi. Everything. I'd be preposterous as a married man's occasional tootsie.

Yet she moved deliberately through the April-chilly streets and played with the pleasurable fantasy of meeting Walker Walters (Walter Walker? No, Walker Walters) in Bermuda.

Until Bermuda, she had not gone to bed with a man in four increasingly lonely years—not because of an absence of attractive opportunities but, she'd solemnly kept reminding herself, because there ought to be more to sex than hopping into the covers.

In Bermuda, not quite two weeks ago, with the setting utterly right, hopping into the covers had been reason enough.

Mario Rubino and Leon Lebowitz were men she knew, Mario in administration at a Bronx clinic, Leon a C.C.S. worker in Cameron, both clean-cut bachelors, both men she liked and neither as men she would consider a serious affair with. But that Thursday had been the conference's last evening, when nearly everyone had gone to Hamilton for late dinner at The Penthouse, and Fran, who drank badly on the very few occasions when she drank at all, had drunk a lot of Pernod in a merry and admittedly childish attempt to keep up with the others. She rode back to the hotel in Somerset Beach in the rear seat of a taxi, between Mario and Leon, who were as drunk as she. The mood was giddy and, when Leon rested his hand on her knee, she impulsively and gaily pulled her skirt back and propped the hand on her naked thigh and mock-intoned, in an accent that was heavy German, "As der herr professor lectured today, 'Sex-u-al repressions invite der emotional disorders, *nein*?' "

Leon's hands went here, and Mario's hands went there, and they were laughing, and her hands kiddingly swarmed over them, and she declared, "*Ach, vos iss?* Ve iss examinink der potentialities uf der group therapy, *ja?*" It started as a silly and harmless game, as parody, too broad and outlandish to be erotic, three civilized nondrinking colleagues who had drunk a lot and who could play this freely because all of it was happy fooling. The taxi driver, a bullnecked Bermudian who, Fran was certain, must have gathered what foolishness had gone on in his back seat, delivered them to the hotel's Cottage A, which she shared with Lydia Rothstein. Lights were on, which meant that Lydia, nice, manless, humorless, Jewish-Baptist Lydia was in, and so the men ordered the driver to keep going to their cottage at the end of the row. Fran agreed, though she wasn't consulted. Tomorrow she would return to tidy, watchful Cameron and the only now and then stimulating treadmill that was her career and her life. An easy nightcap with these sweet, comfortable young men would be just the ticket.

Mario, swaying, uncapped a bottle of Scotch. They drank,

and started nonsense conversations they didn't complete, and Leon pawed her periodically, and everything struck them as hilarious. At one point, Fran was on her feet, weaving and drowsily saying good night Leon, booming with laughter a moment before, was sound asleep on one of the twin beds Mario kissed her. She laughed again, because laughing was what kept it merely a game, but he touched her in ways that she hadn't been touched this night, and presently, eagerly, she switched off the light and they joined together in the other bed She marveled at her freedom, marveled at Mario's steadiness despite all the drinking, marveled at the depth and fullness of her orgasm. She supposed, through the swimming blur of Pernod and Scotch, that she would crawl the next morning into a hole of lasting shame and never come out. Tonight, though, she was loving every second.

The next morning she had wakened with a formidable hangover but no cataclysmic guilt. Maybe, she thought, it was because Mario Rubino was not about to make public mention to the caseworker fraternity and sorority of the classy Mrs. Townes, community healer and one-night shack-up. More likely, she imagined, it was because Bermuda had let her temporarily off the morality hook. It wouldn't happen again, anything like it—her Somerset lover, Mario, could as well have been Leon but she was pleased, and still rather surprised, that she had absolutely no regrets.

Now Fran Townes walked even more deliberately, her lambent hair gathered by the excited wind, and there was regret, a different one, regret that she had not taken Walter Walkers-Waller Walters up on his offer. There was, she realized, something unseemly and indecorous about a long-divorced matron and attentive mother becoming periodically obsessed with the entirely conscious desire for sex Not a Meaningful Relationship, not even Kathy and Heathcliff flying across the moors, but sex, pure and simple, thoroughly impure and wondrously complex, sex quite for its own sake.

The sometimes demon-like urge was a matter of neither pride nor shame; it simply was.

She arrived at the television studio, on the sixteenth floor of the *Brant*'s Building, a comfortable half hour before *Manhattan Digest*'s appointed taping time, having first stopped off at a Walgreen's to phone Lydia Rothstein and arrange a quick dinner together after the show. She wasn't especially nervous or apprehensive, because she had been on television

and radio before, local shows here and in Cameron, as a lay psychotherapist with two public appearance talents—a good voice and the ability to verbalize easily and cogently (plus a third talent for television, a pleasing face). The producer introduced her to the other panelists, one of whom Arthur H. Dobbs she had tangled with on a panel much like this one, and rather despised. Arthur H. Dobbs, a retired head of the U. S. Commission on Narcotic Drugs was still going up and down the land with a single mission to wipe out the drug problem by the simple expedient of convicting and imprisoning not only all traffickers but all users as well.

Manhattan Digest began, and the show focused from the outset on the death of Dorothy Jean Donlin of Cameron, Connecticut. Arthur H. Dobbs asserted that, had the public stood behind him while he had been in office, the scourge of dope would never have been allowed to reach its slimy tentacles into middle-class cities like Cameron. Evan Wylie, a black youth worker, declared that not only Dobbs but all of white America was up in arms over the scourge, now that it was penetrating their neighborhoods, and asked, rhetorically, where their arms had been when the problem was confined essentially to the ghettos. Emil Gotthing, a bald psychiatrist with Sigmund Freud's beard, chose to make a pompous, windy, and useless speech on the symptomology of teenage addiction. Arthur H. Dobbs repeated his claim that all those involved in dope, sellers and users alike, were free agents who knew precisely what laws they were breaking, and who therefore should be rounded up, tried, and locked up.

Then, unaccountably, he trained his guns on Fran, who had just been about to speak. "I'm curious to learn," he said, in a tone of saccharine honey, "if Mrs. Townes here is still in favor of defending law breakers and legalizing dope."

Fran blinked, stunned. Al Cummings, the show's slick and homey host, sat up and said, affably, "I must say *that's* an eye-opener, Commissioner."

"Oh, it isn't to anyone who's heard the clever Mrs. Townes' views on the subject of dope," Dobbs persisted, still sweetly. "She and I were on a panel once before, and I confess I'm still reeling from her incredible statements. That marijuana is no more harmful than peppermint, for instance, and that any kind of dope should be distributed, legally and freely, to anyone who wants it."

Her heart suddenly beating madly, Fran seethed, quietly

but palpably incensed, "Those are loathsome misrepresentations, Mr. Dobbs. Absolutely loathsome."

Doobs shrugged. "I know what I heard. I'm not an imbecile."

"That's exactly what you are, sir!" she snapped, passionately angry with herself for slogging down to his insulting, you're-another level, too outraged for restraint or dignity. "That kind of mental and moral sloppiness is exactly why this government should have relieved you of your post years before it did. I—"

"Just a moment. I retired voluntar—"

"I *never* said I'm convinced that marijuana is harmless. I said there are still conflicting opinions about its ongoing, long range effects, and I deplored the lack of research in the area. But I also said that the easiest way to lose young people's confidence in us is to go on trying to scare them with bogeymen we've invented about pot leading to hard drug addiction. I certainly *never* suggested that any hard drug should be sold or given freely to anyone."

"Ah, then I didn't hear you state that dope should be dispensed to junkies by doctors, freely, day or night?"

"No, you managed to get that muddled, too. I must say I'm revolted by your obvious limitations, Mr. Dobbs; I can't help but suspect that you take some perverse pride in distorting what you hear, or want to hear. It's ugly enough when anyone consciously distorts, but it's despicable when it comes from a man who once had the immerse opportunity to help examine all creative ways to approach a sane drug program—and who failed miserably."

Dobbs was shrugging again and looking about for support among the panel, and Al Cummings seemed ready to interrupt, but Fran would not have it. "What I suggested was that we look into the plan that some countries have of letting doctors dispense drugs to addicts, *on a strict maintenance basis*—which is quite different from what you preferred to think I suggested. Maybe it won't work—I conceded, you may recall, that it mightn't be realistic—but how is it possibly more unworkable than punishing sick people and watching the teenage crime and death rates go up? I'm for encouraging imagination rather than sitting back and relying on the laws and the courts alone to solve the problem. I'm for investigating what's happened to our country and our goals in less than a generation that's made so many young people feel so rudderless. I'm for investigating *why* so many of them find a drug culture attractive. I'm for looking into

any and all workable avenues that can possibly help sick people, Mr. Dobbs, not simply to crack their heads in; muscle is something any street corner thug has. I'm for petitioning our government to recognize finally that the emergency is a national one and to step in and do something, fast."

"Oh, come now, don't call Uncle Sam *and* me heartless monsters, Mrs. Townes. I believe in rehabilitation if one genuinely wants to rehabilitate himself, and so does Uncle Sam. Let me add it's costing him a pretty penny, every day of the year."

"I'm talking about money, not pretty pennies—money and dedicated concern." She paused, but only for a moment. "I apologize if I sound shrill and all-knowing. I realize that I haven't been concerned enough, either. My work and my home are in Cameron, Connecticut, where Dorothy Jean Donlin lived, and died. Cameron's median income is higher than most cities in the United States, but otherwise it's not radically different from other communities. Nor are its people different. Mr. Wylie is entirely right, as long as addiction stayed in the black and poor ghettos, we smug, middle-class whites couldn't have been less disturbed. But now that it's descended on *our* block, there's sudden panic.

"And how do we deal with our panic? Unless we're personally involved because someone close to us gets hooked, we simply heighten our hypocrisy without letting go of our smugness. In one way or another, we encourage our school boards—in your city, in mine—to deny there's a growing plague in our schools, we instruct our newspapers to play it down except where it exists in other communities. We continue to be ostriches, to wear the protective blinders, we—"

"Do you know that to be the case, Mrs. Townes?" Al Cummings broke in. "That your schools *and* newspaper in Cameron are consciously, purposely covering up a teenage drug problem in that city?"

"Of course they are. Oh, it isn't an evil conspiracy to hoodwink the public. It's merely saying, why jeopardize tenures, why frighten profitable outside businesses and factories away from moving in with their families?" She recognized suddenly that she had swept perhaps too far, realized there were sure to be troublesome boomerangs after this day. Soften it fast, she thought. "I'm not implying that they're all cowardly or venal," she said. "Some of them truly believe they're handling the problem best by doing nothing, and that any publicity will only create new cases

and hurt the innocent. But the problem grows behind that wall of silence, and obviously not in my community alone. The whole society is wearing blinkers. We wear them because if we take them off we'll all have to start spending money—all the money necessary to build new and better and more treatment facilities wherever they're needed, to begin with."

"You're recommending the one thing I love to do most: pay more and more taxes," Al Cummings said, and grinned broadly to show he was fooling, and then asked, "Seriously, though, wouldn't the program you're outlining cost the taxpayers a fortune?"

"Yes, but we're used to spending fortunes," Fran replied. "We spend fortunes on the space program. We spend fortunes to keep ourselves in Asia. And we don't complain about spending that kind of money—too few of us do, at any rate. Yes, of course a realistic program will be fearfully expensive, but—"

Arthur H. Dobbs twinkled. "I was wondering when you'd get around to politics, Mrs. Townes."

"Politics?"

"Every time you world-rescuing bleeding hearts defend the vicious criminals who sell and take dope, you never seem to fail to nail on a little lecture attacking America for having the gall to oppose Communism. Isn't it interesting that those who take a consistently soft line on criminals take a consistently hard line on the United States—"

Evan Wylie interrupted Dobbs to condemn Vietnam. Al Cummings interrupted Evan Wylie to remind everyone that the topic was teenagers and narcotics. Emil Gotting, airily seated on Olympus, convoluted his way through . . . what?

Nothing that mattered, Fran decided. Livid and frustrated, she sat back and let the show's remaining minutes conclude without her, convinced that she had made no points well or adequately, because of that animal Dobbs, because of herself. And more convinced than ever that all speechifiers who thought of themselves as experts—herself included—were not the ones who were going to help unhook Dorothy Jean Donlin's generation.

The taping was done at seven. Al Cummings and the producer thanked her, and she fled to the sixteenth floor lobby where she waited for the elevator, depleted and dissatisfied, in no mood for dinner with Lydia. Just before the cage door opened, she heard, "Mrs. Townes?" and turned to face a smiling Arthur H. Dobbs, his hand outstretched.

"No hard feelings, Mrs. Townes?" he said. "It's just a show."

Fran gazed at his hand and then his face, aghast. There was absolutely no way to answer the uninsultable man, so she hastened into the cage.

The crowded elevator had descended halfway to the main lobby when she heard, "Mrs. Townes?" yet again, and looked up to see a familiar man, very tall and very attractive. Mr . . . Forbes? Yes, Mr. Forbes, from Cameron, whom she had met once or twice at Cameron civic meetings.

Wasn't he a widower? She couldn't recall. Maybe it was someone else.

They smiled as they emerged into the lobby, and each asked what the other was doing so far from home. Fran explained the silly television thing. He explained that his office was in this building. "I'm on my way home," he said. "Would you like a lift? I drove in this morning—at least once a month I swear I've had it with the Penn Central, and I take the car."

"I'd love a lift," she said, "if you wouldn't mind waiting one minute till I make a phone call."

"All the time you want."

She telephoned Lydia that she was tired, after all, and had a ride, and then she and the tall, attractive man walked to a garage, where an attendant bawled, "Half a sec, Mr. Forbes," and disappeared between automobiles and returned in a year-old Ambassador.

The drive to Cameron took an hour. He asked her about the television show. Fran described it, and described Dobbs, and they talked about the Donlin tragedy, and he mentioned that he and the Donlins lived on the same street.

They talked about many things, easily, as new and old friends, and a relationship between Fran Townes and Charles Forbes began; a relationship that eventually would involve a number of people, including Monica Spencer and Tom Jara.

Chapter 2

1

A faint, warm haze lay low against the ground as Tom Jara drove across the George Washington Bridge shortly before dusk, a haze that lent the approaching city an atmosphere of unreality. At the first free street space he came upon after the bridge, he parked Joe College's Rambler, wiped his fingerprints from the steering wheel and the door handles, took his gear and guitar from the back seat, and got out of the car and locked all the doors. He walked until he saw a gutter grate, and he dropped the car keys into it. He had considered selling the car for cash on the spot to the first cat who would ask no questions, but decided not to stretch his luck, not in a city like New York that he didn't understand yet, felt no vibrations from yet, a city that wasn't his yet. He walked past people who didn't look all that different from people in all the other places he had been, to a wide street that said Broadway and W. 179 St. He went into a drug store in a big bus terminal, found *Moon Music Co.* in the Manhattan telephone book, fished a dime from his pocket, and dialed the number. He felt a boundless sense of exhilaration, felt that everything great was only seconds away.

The woman who answered said that Mr. Moon had left for the day. She didn't even ask who was calling, or why.

"Look, like my name's Tom Jara—J-A-R-A, will you write that down," Tom said hastily, "and Benny doesn't know me by name, but I just got here to town and Benny's brother Spank—Sid's his real name—Sid told me to look Benny up. Ah—"

"Call back tomorrow."

"Whoa, hold on. Tomorrow I may be out of the country; I don't know any tomorrows. Where can I catch Benny Moon now, or in a little while?"

"You can't. He's left for the day. He'll be in around eleven tomorrow morning."

Click.

"Hey? Hello?"

Nowhere *bitch.* Tom slammed the receiver down and thought of yanking the whole goddamn telephone out of the goddamn wall; instead, he sat in the booth, puzzling his next move, until someone rapped at the glass and barked at him to either use the phone or let someone else use it. He left the booth and took a counter seat at the drug store's circular counter and ordered a burger, with the trimmings, and coffee. The waitress was a walking X-ray, maybe ninety pounds bareass wet and for sure nothing to go horny over, but he gave her his approving and playful smile, the you-might-be-worth-balling one, and she flushed as he knew she would, and she looked at him over her skinny shoulder as she went to place the order, as he knew she would.

Tom Jara was not compellingly handsome by commercial standards or even by current rock-culture standards, but there was intelligence and perceptiveness and authority and a sweet, controlled beauty in his angular and keen-featured face, a face one associated with either infinite goodness or pitiless retaliation, depending on the expression he willed for himself at any given moment. What was most memorable about Tom Jara was not his flowing, silky hair or his trim beard, but his large, frank eyes, eyes that never, never rested. He looked shaggier this day than he wished he did—he hadn't been able to bathe for a couple of days, and he was embarrassed that the fingernails of his beautiful hands were dirty, and he had always prided himself on his clean nails—but the walking X-ray didn't notice things like that. None of them ever did. Some of them preferred to stay quite clear of him, as they preferred to stay clear of tranquil lakes that had sudden, unexpected drops. But what most of them saw when they looked at Tom, and kept looking, was a man who could scare them, whom they were just daring enough to want to be scared by, a strong, tender, firm, persuasive cat who could talk them into anything because he could make them trust him, all the while he made fear something sensual and delicious.

The X-ray brought the burger and coffee, and he said, "Thanks. Wait, don't hustle away."

"Do you want something else?"

"Yeah. I just blew into town from Vegas, and I need

someone to show me the sights when she gets done work. How soon're you finished here for the day?"

She didn't seem to dig. Then she did, and the red flush became a quick vermilion flush, and she goggled this way and that, as if looking to escape. She showed him her finger with the marriage ring on it, and mumbled something about other customers, and split, fast.

Tom grinned, and wolfed his sandwich, and didn't leave a tip. He paid his tab because the old man behind the register was eyeballing him, and he asked how far Times Square was from here. The old man directed him to a subway station, up that escalator and down another one, and told him to stay on an express train till Forty-second Street, and that would be Times Square. Tom followed the directions, through hurrying rush hour crowds, and paid thirty cents for a token. The downtown subway platform was comparatively empty, and the only other person near him as he waited was a Jew, with a beard and long curly sideburns and a black frock coat. Tom smiled at him, one beard to another. The Jew nodded, coming on a little unsettled, and ceremoniously stepped away from him to a part of the platform where there were more people, as if Tom was a freak goy looking to crack his skull because that was what all freak goys were looking to do. The picture of it gave him pleasure.

He sprawled on the wooden bench, hooked his booted foot over the arm rest, and opened Joe College's smooth brown leather wallet. He counted thirty-one dollars, a disappointment but enough, along with his own twenty-eight dollars and change, to tide him until he and Benny connected. Most of the wallet's cards and papers were useless, but he pocketed the credit card signed *Harvey N. Miller, Jr.* Harvey's Lord Elgin had seen better days, and there were scratch marks on the glass, but the watch might haul in some sensible bread. Otherwise, old Harvey hadn't provided much of a windfall.

The subway train screamed in, just like in the movies, and he thought of the nowhere bitch at Benny Moon's office, and he saw her bloody mouth full of his fist and he saw her picking up her teeth. Always somebody, damn near everywhere, out to hang you up, to get between you and the cat who's ready to do you some good.

On the train that rocked fast over dark tracks, he was again disappointed. He was still expecting to see a special New York City look on the faces, and he didn't see it; the

travelers' tired-staring eyes were the same he'd seen in El Paso, the spades' resigned looks were the same he'd seen in Houston. There was indifference, no connection, no links, and this was disturbing, nearly as much as the nowhere bitch with the call back-tomorrow putdown was disturbing.

Benny's ready and waiting to do you some good. You play and sing him the songs you wrote and he'll fall out . . . Yeah? Where's the proof, where's it down on paper that Benny's got the open arms and waiting to fall out? he thought, although he knew that such thoughts were sure as hell not good luck thoughts. For the last eight of his forty-seven months in Texas stir, his cellmate Spank Moon had been coming on about my big shot music publisher brother Benny and man, you just drop Spank's name and if you got the goods to deliver, my brother Benny'll take over and you're set for life.

Tom suddenly felt cold. *Call back tomorrow* hadn't been in the plans at all.

He checked his gear and guitar in one of the bustling Forty-second Street subway station's trunk sized lockers and hurried up the nearest steps that led to Times Square, *the* Times Square, excitement and anticipation beating at him hard. The evening had begun and the rain was soft, even friendly. He had no geographic sense of the city, but this was a city, man, he discovered at once and exuberantly, *the* city, the biggest action town anywhere, with people rushing but all of them sure of exactly where they were headed. Times Square—here it was, bigger than he'd heard, bigger than its pictures—was alive with moving people and a storm of electric lights, even though the evening was still a baby. He went up one side of Broadway and down the other side of Seventh Avenue, missing nothing, and he brought the sights into his arms and hugged them, the wild colors and all the human voices, the straight haircuts and the briefcases mixing in and through the cowboys and drifters and their chicks. Neoned movie shows and blood banks ("We Pay Cash") and porno book shops and pizzerias and Chink restaurants and people, people, restless, milling, watching, eyes-dancing people. Big-ball jazz bawling down from somewhere near, the beaver's tail thump of a bass fiddle, the trumpets going wah-wah-wahhhh and showing off. Somewhere else an amplified guitar screaming over drums. Go-go dancers, seen from outside the saloon windows, up on a stage and snapping their fingers and chomping gum and moving their

puckered beef to the music. A crazy in an Army coat three sizes too big, grabbing arms and singing, "Satan's gonna git'cha, Satan's gonna git'cha." Fat man in the dirty apron, wiping his counter and yelling, "Frankfoodas, daya red hot, here's ya *red hot frank*foodas!" Din everywhere, sounds, noises, laughter, feet, movement, lights, and Tom went up and down, and back and forth again, ignoring or shaking his head at the cowboys and the junks and the cruisers who approached him or just looked at him in hopes of a connection, any connection. He didn't want them, he didn't want losers. What he had was all he wanted, all he needed, the biggest turf of all waiting with the platinum keys for him, just for him.

Finally, when he could leave it, he returned to the subway station and entered a filthy john. Above the urinal was printed, in neat, block letters:

CORINNE
YOU SAY HOW—CALL AFTER 9

and there was a phone number. Framed next to it was a printed sign, advertising *The Herald Hotel. Clean Inexpensive. Transient's welcome.* There was a West Forty-third Street address. A dude in Ivy League, maybe Tom's age, suddenly materialized at the next urinal and guiltily regarded him, not directly, with the apprehensive eye of a divinity student sneaking home after a gang bang. "That Corinne must be riddled with the syph by now," the dude said in a voice so shaky that Tom's antennae twanged and he knew the dude was about to offer a wedding and honeymoon.

Ivy League could have been, probably was, Officer Fuzz. A throat-clearer just like him, in a public can near Abilene, had turned out to be Officer Fuzz, first with the money and then the show of handcuffs, and Tom had had to bounce Fuzz's head against the wall twice in order to clear out clean. "No, you're wrong," Tom told the dude, and smiled, and zipped up. "Corinne happens to be my old lady. We're getting married in the morning."

He retrieved his gear and guitar from the locker, and a lady at a pretzel and chestnut stand directed him to West Forty-third Street. The Herald Hotel was seedy and for losers, and the losers in the cramped lobby looked as though they had been born there, as though they had never left there, he paused at the lip of the lobby, smelled the disinfectant and decay, then turned on his heel and strode out,

shoulders straight. He found Broadway again, prepared to pay fifty dollars for the night if that was what it would take to sleep in class for just one night, and entered the first classy hotel he came to, one with a doorman and a broad, green fringed awning several blocks up the street and just off Broadway. The lapel carnation behind the lobby desk surveyed him like it was garbage day and said sorry, but there was a convention in town and a room wasn't available. Tom showed his roll of bills. The carnation said sorry again and left to register a straight couple who didn't have a reservation. Rage welled in Tom Jura, and the most significant lesson he had ever learned was that if you're not cool, always, then you're begging to be a loser, but he sprang between the couple and yelled too loudly, he knew—at the desk clerk, "Whoa, now *whoa* there, man! Who the hell you figure you're crowding out here? I offered to lay bread on you, right? And in front, right? You come on with this full-up crap, man, my manager'll be in to see your boss, you couldn't live long enough to hear just the titles of all the hit songs I've written and—"

The carnation went white and snapped his fingers, and then there was an ox in plain clothes but clearly fuzz, and then Tom was out on the sidewalk and the ox was rasping at him, "You ain't back at the ranch here, cookie. I treat you heroes nice like this just once. I see you a second time, within a mile of here, I'm not so nice. The second time, I cut off your nuts and mail them home to your mama for Christmas. You following me good, cookie?"

"Let go the threads, fuzz," Tom hissed, disgraced, humiliated.

"Sure. Sure I apologize for mussing your swell Brooks Brothers suit. Now go find the sewer where you belong, and remember me. I enjoy my job. I get my jollies out of racking up little hero turds like you."

Tom went back to the Herald Hotel. The rate was five dollars a night, thirty a week. He signed the register *Thomas P. Worthington III, Las Vegas, Nev.*, because his true name was too good for a dump like this, and said he wasn't sure how long he'd be staying. The desk clerk with the black eyeshade and rubber bands for sleeve garters barely gazed at the register and called for five dollars in advance. "You're not a trusting cat, are you?" Tom grinned, eager to be friendly with someone, anyone.

"Not my own mother." Tom peeled off a five and let him see the roll. The cat barely gazed at the roll, either.

The single room, down a fifth floor linoleumed hall, was large enough to hold only a narrow bed, sink, chair, bureau, and inches of space to get from one to the other. He intended to shower—there was a shower at the end of the hall—and change into his other shirt and socks, which were clean, and go out and groove with the city again. But after he showered and returned to the bleak, cheerless, familiar room with the single, naked, forty-watt ceiling bulb, he sat on the bed, inspected his immaculate nails, and changed his mind. He was scared.

Benny Moon accepted his telephone call, wearily said that Spank should have dropped dead sixteen times, and wearily added that he wasn't in the market for any music for the next couple of months, if then. Yeah, yeah, Spank was big with the lip, which was all he was big with. "Tough, if that klutz brother of mine dreamed up a dream for you, pal," Benny Moon said. "You being a jailbird's got nothing to do with anything. If Kern, Porter and Gershwin waltz in here now from the clouds upstairs and give me a gross of guaranteed new hits, then I'll listen to music. But I don't know from you, pal, and the truth of the matter is, I don't meet the rent this month unless I find some pop bottles to cash in."

Click, just like the nowhere bitch.

On Forty-second Street, Tom climbed two flights of stairs to a barber shop and had his hair and beard lightly trimmed. The bill came to a dollar and fifty cents, and he tipped a dollar. Near Eighth Avenue, at a men's sportswear shop that honored credit cards, he picked out a wardrobe that totaled up to just under two hundred dollars, and nonchalantly handed the credit card to the clerk who had outfitted him. The cat asked Mister, ah, Miller for identification. "My card's always been identification enough," Tom said airily.

"I'm sorry, but we need more positive identification."

"'Sorry, sorry.'" Tom whipped the card from him and angrily pocketed it. "Everybody in this hick town is sorry. What's everybody so sorry about?" He stalked out of the store.

By day and without lights and sounds, he discovered as he wandered more, Times Square was a hungover whore who'd fallen asleep with all her mascara on. Joining company with his pain and loss and worry as he wandered with his guitar over his shoulder were the uncertain shadows that always kept one step behind him, the goddamn ghosts waiting

for him to slip. In a cigar store, he copied the phone numbers of ten music publishers from a phone book and, armed with ten names, took a deep breath and placed his first call. When the seventh call added up to the first six—write a letter, send your agent, make an appointment for sometime next week, drop in late next week or so without an appointment, get lost—he wandered out of the cigar store. He wandered into an Automat and carried his tray to a table next to a nearly bald lady who turned out to be a crazy who babbled, and he didn't finish his chicken pie. He wandered into a porno store and leafed through the orgy magazines until the guy at the till ordered him to buy or scram. He wandered, and wandered, and could not understand why he had come to a town too big for him. He wanted to be home. There was no such place, but he wanted to be there. He wanted to sit on a porch chair that tilted back against the wall, the points of his shoes hooked through the rungs, and smell rain on scrub pine and see wet chickens shake themselves and leave tracks in the red clay by the porch.

By dusk, a small panic had begun to set in. Then he suddenly remembered the Colliacos. Newark, New Jersey, wasn't it?

In the phone booth of a Times Square bus terminal, he told the long distance operator that he wanted the number of Dominic Colliaco in Newark, New Jersey. He got the number, and called it. Until he was fourteen, he had lived in eleven foster homes. Each family had been lousier or more indifferent than the family before, except for one, the Colliacos. About five years ago, just after he'd married Arlene Jo and just before he'd been busted for armed robbery and manslaughter, he'd been in Amarillo and tried to look them up, just to say hello and see how well they remembered him. The lady who answered at their pad said they'd moved to Newark, New Jersey.

The number rang, and Tom tensed. He and Mrs. Colliaco had never really dug each other, although she was one hell of a cook and kept shoveling food into him and clucking that he was too thin, but he had more than dug old Dominic. Old Dom had a wild mustache and a blackgloved hand, and he'd taken Tom to the Sunday bocci meets, and sometimes in the hot evenings they would sit on the fire escape, just the two of them, old Dom chainsmoking his Kools and hacking, and he would talk about his relatives in Perugia. He yelled a lot when he wasn't hacking or reminiscing, but he was a warm man, the best man Tom had ever known.

Lina Colliaco answered the phone. Yes, she remembered Tom.

"Dominic die two year ago, on Good Friday," she said. "He smoke'a, smoke'a, smoke'a, cough alla night. Good Friday, I go get him up, he die, he no get up. Whatta you call, huh? Whatta you call for, bum?"

"Bum? Don't talk like that. I'm very sorry to hear about Dominic. I'm—here in New York City for a while. I'd—like to come over and see you."

"*Brutto animale,* what I gonna see you for? Bum, with the stealing, we nail something down with the hammer, you steal anyway. What you want to see me, to steal my shoes, bum? Go 'way, 'way, 'way. My Dominic, he talk good for you, but he's'a dumb. Me, I no so dumb. Go 'way, 'way."

And click. And son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch with the son of a bitch clicks.

He came away from the booth, reeling slightly, and the focus in front of him was blurred and he felt helpless and frightened. His knees buckled and he pitched against a chick who was waiting for the booth. She let out a tiny yip. Her hands and her body caught the force of him before he landed on the cold floor, and she landed with him. Helplessness instantly gave way to mortification, and Tom rose quickly, with dignity, determined never to be this freaky again in public, and raised her to her feet. He threw her his most playful and confident smile and asked, "Why'd you trip me?"

"Why'd I wha-at!" She was brushing her coat. She was teen stuff, maybe jailbait, with corn color hair piled on top of her head to make her come on older. Her coat was open and her skirt was almost up to the box. She didn't radiate anything resembling class, but she was a looker—or would be if she wiped the glop off; she wore too much paint and it was on all wrong—and he would have gone nine to two that she wasn't a hustler, but there was something in those kid wide eyes that said she swung, or was ready to learn. "Listen, are you all right?" she asked.

"Perfect. I brought a knee back from Vietnam that gives out every once in a while, that's all. Everything's cool. Thanks for the cushion, anyway. What about you? Did you get hurt?"

They met, Tom and the thin, flustered kid chick who was in no hurry to split, and the connection they made was voiceless and nearly instantaneous. Her name was Georgia, she said, Georgia Twardesky, and she turned a little and

then he saw that she wasn't alone; a chick was with her, smaller and more stacked. "This is my girl friend, Shirley Coyne," she introduced. Tom introduced himself simply as Tom, and Shirley Coyne reacted to his full voltage smile with a mild but telling blush. Fifteen minutes later, the three of them sat at a cafeteria table, Tom with coffee, the chicks with Pepsis and filter cigarettes.

They were both in New York for the day, just to look around, Georgia Twardesky said, now meeting his gaze, now glancing nervously away. "We're only just an hour away from here by the train," she explained, "but sometime it's like the other end of the world. Where we're at, it's nothing doing every minute."

"Where's that?"

"Cameron, in Connecticut," Shirley Coyne said. "You ever hear of it?"

He shook his head. "I just blew in from Vegas. Should I know a—what do you call it—a Cameron?"

Georgia put out one cigarette and lit another. Her hand wasn't steady. "No. It's kind of a drag. There isn't any reason for you to hear about it. Uh—where are you from?"

"All over." He spoke offhandedly of his past: his success with his rock group, interrupted by 'Nam that had given him the Medal of Honor and a long stretch in an Army hospital, and his recent gigs out West and all over Europe and South America. He spoke of his present: all the music companies interested in his songs. He spoke of his future: his mission to rid the world of its hangups and hypocrisy and get everyone to groove together. And when they were impressed enough, he asked, "What makes that Cameron a drag? Anybody with a little imagination can swing good in a small town."

The chicks turned to each other for the fleck of a moment. "Swing?" Georgia repeated, uncertainly. "Like how do you mean?"

"Like however's your thing. They must trip out now and then in Cameron. Or at least blow a little grass, like every Tuesday night after the church socials. Or somebody balls somebody, right? Or maybe Cameron's fresh out of kicks and that's why you two come here to the city."

His quiet intensity, the goading in it, cut the air as he meant for it to. Shirley Coyne, the one who was flustered now, excused herself to go to the little girl's room.

Tom watched her go, watched the nice rump and nice enough ankles, and mimicked, "'Little girl's room.' What

other snappy sayings does your friend know? 'Twenty-three skidoo'? "

"Shirley's all right. She'd fool you."

"How would she fool me?"

"She digs you. I can tell. You could teach her a thing or two, but she might be a pretty far-out teacher herself."

"What about you? Do you have a teacher's license?"

A teenage giggle. "When I'm in the mood, I run the whole college."

"What's that, a sales pitch?"

Georgia frowned at the table top. "I don't sell anything."

Tom chuckled. "The truth. What're you two doing here in town? You're not hustling. Or are you? The truth."

She shook her head and there was a good, long pause. "We're here for something. We're not sure what. All Shirley and me know is that there's excitement around somewhere. Not just balling—we can get plenty of that in Cameron, or anyplace—but real living. And we're not getting our share of it."

"My cup's empty here," he said. "You want to go and get me another coffee?"

That made her sore, for some reason, and she showed him some temper. "What're you, paralyzed?" she complained. "Who was your spook slave last year? Go get your own damn coffee!"

He stared at her for long moments, holding her eyes with the intensity of his look. "I don't figure you really mean that," he said slowly, softly, as certain as ever that you deserved what you got if you didn't dominate them right from the beginning. "I figure we're *both* here looking for something—something important—and I figure maybe we're both about to find it. I figure we'll do things for each other because we *want* to." He smiled, his eyes still locked on hers. "I figure *you* know we have a lot of teaching to do together, and a whole lot of friendly rapping ahead of us. And I figure you'd *like* to go and get that coffee for me."

Her eyes were wide and almost tearful, but she nodded and held out her hand, which shook a little, palm upward. He gave her some change and watched her walk to the counter, and he saw men at nearby tables watching too.

And he knew that something big was going to happen. Maybe not today. Soon. Something bigger than balling her, or them; something bigger than peddling their tails; something bigger than business, or even pleasure.

Something he would have to think about, develop, perfect.

Something great and vast and memorable, something that was love and punishment intertwined.

Memorable. He liked that.

Shirley Coyne returned to the table first, not meeting his eyes directly at all. Tom scooped a handful of coins from his pocket and, though he did not smoke, said, "How about getting me a pack of butts from the machine over there?"

She blinked. "Well, ah, what brand?"

"Kools. My old man used to smoke nothing but, and I keep it like in the family. Here: take all the change. I don't know how much it is."

He poured the coins into her cupped palms, and looked up at her and grinned. She grinned back, tentatively, and obediently went to the cigarette machine, which was near the water fountain.

2

Four days after Dorothy Jean Donlin's burial, Victor Donlin returned to Cameron from Manitoba, where he had deposited his wife Faith to be with her parents, and announced that he was far from satisfied with the slaggard way in which the Cameron Police Department was going about finding and apprehending his baby's killer. He made no secret of the fact that he was hiring private detectives, one from Fairfield County and two from New York.

Police Chief Edwin Makorny met with the Cameron *Sun Sentinel* and stated, "We're doing everything under the sun to get to the bottom of this." Privately he ordered his men, whom he knew were not magicians, "Find the schmuck, or schmucks, and bring them to me. All I need now is for James Bond to catch the fish."

Like most recent Cameron cases involving narcotics, the Donlin case dribbled, free of substantial leads or hope, until one evening, a week and a half after the burial, when a tired Ed Makorny was at home on Powell Street, vaguely watching a Gleason and Carney rerun on television, with his stockinged feet on the hassock and a barely sipped beer in his hand. His unmarried daughter Margaret answered the telephone in the hall and came into the parlor. "Someone with a young voice," she said. "He won't give his name or his business, but he says it's important. The station told

him where to reach you. He didn't want to talk to anybody there."

Makorny picked up the extension phone, his eyes on Gleason. "Makorny."

"The name of the man that fed Dorothy Jean's habit is Lewis Brown," came a soft, earnest voice. "He lives at 14 Stover, in South Cameron. He's been feeding a lot of habits here in town, and he's got junks, mostly from school, working for him. He'll be in the parking lot at Phil's Bowl-A-Rama tonight at nine, maybe a little after. He drives a four-year-old mustard brown Plymouth hardtop, and here's his license plate," the young voice said, and read a number. "He's a baker at Fritz Frohlich's on Arctic. He's fifty years old. He has black hair and he wears it in a faggy pompadour, and he wears rimless glasses and he has big horse teeth. You getting all this?"

"Yeah. What's your name?"

"Two guys, one of them goes to Cameron High, the other one dropped out last year, they'll be in the lot to make a meet with Brown. One's name is Chester Olds, the other's name is Barry Dwiggins," the narc said, and described them.

"Why didn't you give all this to headquarters when you called and I wasn't there?"

"Because I got information that you're straight, but some of your fuzz aren't. I didn't want anyone but the head man."

"Who are you, son?"

"A junk that should've killed Brown six months ago," the narc replied softly and hung up.

Makorny hung up, too, and made some telephone calls.

Shortly before half past eight, with no time to have obtained a warrant, three unmarked cars were deployed in the immediate vicinity of Phil's Bowl-A-Rama's parking lot, one car positioned to observe an actual transaction being made, if any, the other two situated to block any attempts to escape. Chief of Detectives Neal Trewitt, waiting in the observe car, was bitterly aware of all the possible pitfalls of a nonwarrant bust; he had watched too many pushers waltz away from justified conviction because there hadn't been time to get warrants, and their yelping lawyers' charges of unconstitutional improper search had been all the courts had needed to have proved. If tonight's tip wasn't the hallucination of an overjuiced junkie, Speedy Information, which some judges still honored as the only legally expeditious way to grab vermin in the act, would have to suffice.

The parking lot was illuminated by overhead lights just

bright enough for bowlers' cars to enter, park, and leave without bumping into one another. There weren't many cars this night.

At a minute before nine, Trewitt touched the arm of Officer Rafe Stonewall, who sat at the wheel; two young men who could well be Olds and Dwiggins appeared from the side of the bowling alley and stood in the shadow of the delivery entrance door. Seven minutes later, a four-year-old mustard brown Plymouth hardtop entered the lot and stopped some thirty feet from the delivery entrance door. The two young men glanced about them and quickly approached the Plymouth. Through high-powered binoculars, Trewitt watched the Plymouth's left front window roll down, watched one of the young men hand the driver something, and saw the driver hand something to the young man.

"Now," Trewitt said.

Stonewall pressed gas and headlights blazing to catch sight of any object that might be dropped or thrown, the car flew to the left side of the Plymouth, missing only by inches the two startled kids, one of whom was momentarily paralyzed into motionlessness, the other of whom tried to run. Trewitt and Stonewall were barely out of their car before eight plainclothes officers materialized in spread out positions to make escape impossible. The kid who had tried to run hurriedly stuffed something into his mouth. As hurriedly, Officer Anthony Pimenti's fingers pried the mouth open and retrieved a glassine envelope. Officers Marvin Rivlin and Rafe Stonewall arranged the kids, arms raised and bellies against the Plymouth's hood, and searched them and agreed they were clean except for the one unswallowed envelope. The policemen then waited for Trewitt to take over.

Neal Trewitt did. He opened the Plymouth door and barked, "Out," to a pompadoured man with rimless glasses and large teeth who stepped out without a word. Trewitt nodded to Stonewall, who frisked the man carefully and found nothing of suspicion in the man's pockets. "The rest of the stuff's in there on the floor," Rafe Stonewall said. "All he had time to get through the window was the one package."

"It stays there," said Trewitt. "Nobody goes inside that car till we get it to the station, lock it up, and get us a warrant." He faced the man whose driver's license read Lewis Brown, no middle initial. "Move, schmuck."

Lewis Brown surrendered his car keys, and he and the two kids were led to the unmarked car which waited at the

right side of the bowling alley, and were driven to headquarters. Rivlin and Pirronti drove the Plymouth to headquarters. Trewitt and Stonewall drove there in the observe car, having first detailed Officer Joseph McElroy to phone Chief Makorny and report what was on the way.

Ed Makorny, who had returned to the station house, took the call and placed one to Assistant District Attorney Noel Ingram's home and another one to the home of Judge John Cicalo with essentially the same stern suggestion to each: "Let's button this up right away. There'll be a lot of questions this town'll be asking tomorrow."

Lewis Brown, Barry Dwiggins, and Chester Olds were apprised of their right to be represented by counsel before submitting to interrogation. Dwiggins and Olds, each sixteen years old, were offered the opportunity to have their parents called. Barry Dwiggins balked and claimed that he didn't want his parents brought in on his bust, but he finally, resignedly, recited his telephone number. Chester Olds lived with an aunt who, he maintained, spent most of her evenings in the bars and probably wouldn't be at home; she wasn't at home, an officer found, and so Olds was assigned a public defender. Lewis Brown said that his lawyer's name was Willard Cannon. He would say nothing else. "This clam knows the score," Neal Trewitt remarked to Makorny, and said to Lewis Brown, "Who taught you to clam, Lewis? How much is one and one? No, don't answer. We'd use it against you and that wouldn't be constitutional, would it, Lewis?"

Willard Cannon, who was an attorney and certified public accountant and Lewis Brown's brother-in-law, arrived soon after the warrant did and the Plymouth was searched; eleven plastic envelopes containing cut heroin were found on the car floor; on the front seat was a white cardboard box containing a birthday cake and a box of birthday candles. "Who'll the arraignment judge be?" Cannon asked Makorny. "And what do you figure the bond'll go for?"

"Answer One: Judge Aaron Kohn," Makorny replied.

"Oy. There's one tough Yid. I'd feel better with Eichmann."

"Answer Two: Noel Ingram's going to ask for fifty thousand and probably get twenty-five thousand."

"Twenty. Come *on!* Where's a man like Brown going to dream up that kind of bond? He's an employed baker, with a wife and three small kids. Bakers don't even dream of that kind of—"

"Are you still advising your client to dummy up, counselor?"

"Of course I am, except to advise him to plead not guilty tomorrow."

"Then if you want to make a statement about unrealistic bail, see the judge in the morning. Don't suck around me to do something I can't do."

"Just a minute, you carry weight, you can pull—"

"No, *you* just a minute. Your Mr. Brown isn't accused of grabbing a lady's snatch on the 6th, counselor. I personally don't happen to be too tolerant about the way this baker earns his pin money, so spare me the longtime-resident-in-the-community song and dance if that's what you're thinking of. Whether he was the one that sold the shit that killed the Little Donlin girl, I don't know. But there's something I do know. I saw the Donlin kid's corpse. You didn't. Your client—or whoever's in the business of selling the shit to children—didn't see her. I did, counselor. And I've seen some pretty cute faces on fresh violent deaths in thirty-eight years on the Force, but this particular one had me puking up my breakfast and supper, five days and nights in a row. I'll be glad to give you a description, counselor."

"Ah . . . no, thanks. I'm not the jury, remember? Or the accused. I can do without the lectures. That excessive bond, though—"

"It was the cutest sight I ever did see. The face was bloated to almost twice its normal size, and blue as a bluejay. The lips were blue, too, enlarged and blue. Her eyes were wide open and staring—you could tell she'd suffered something awful beforehand, gasping for air and not getting any because she'd run clean out of oxygen. And the cutest dried froth around her mouth and her nostrils . . . The Medical Examiner called the cause of death 'sudden heart failure owing to intracutaneous cardiac and respiratory paralysis.' Now I'm not a doctor, but I'd give the cause of death another long, fancy name. And your client's name just might be in the title."

Cannon appeared shocked and angry. "You're saying some very dangerous things about a man who hasn't been formally charged with anything yet. I'm surprised at you."

Ed Makorny nodded. "What you might be suspecting about me is correct, counselor. Deep in my soul, I'm not a pureheated defender of private enterprise. To me, a man with all the evidence of making a profit out of handling out death for a buck is a prick, and I'd like to be the first one in

line to chop it off. You figure twenty-five grand is too high a bail for your client, counselor? Okay, suppose I recommend something lighter to the D.A., and suppose you see it your client will jump at the chance. You say he has three small kids. I'll recommend that the judge let your client out, free as a bird—all he has to do is let his three small kids be put in a nice room with a lot of nice H, and be persuaded what nice candy it is until they shoot it. And have him there to watch. What do you say, counselor? Will your client go for it? Or will he be outraged at the mention of it?"

Judge Aaron Kohn's court was crowded with people who had business before it and with observers. One of the observers was Victor Donlin, who sat, alone, near the back.

Because he was not satisfied that home supervision would be adequate, Judge Kohn directed that Chester Olds be held in custody until the hearing date. He did, however, place Barry Dwiggins in the custody of the youth's parents, who were present at the arraignment. Mrs. Warren Dwiggins plaintively wept. Mr. Warren Dwiggins looked alternately dazed and furious.

Judge Kohn set Lewis Brown's bail, as Chief Makorny had predicted, at twenty-five thousand dollars. Willard Cannon stepped forward to plead that his client was a longtime resident of the community, a devoted husband and father and quite unlikely to jump bail, employed but in no position to begin to meet such an excessive bond, and requested that it be lowered considerably.

"Request denied," Judge Kohn said, and set the hearing date for two weeks hence.

As Lewis Brown was being led away, Victor Donlin leapt up, shrieking curses, and rushed at him. Before he could be restrained, he had thrown Lewis Brown to the hard floor and kicked Brown's head repeatedly.

3

The day after Fran Townes' appearance on *Manhattan Digest* was aired, her boss, Ben Hoff, took calls from people Fran would have imagined were smarter than they were. Cyril Kingsley, who was the publisher of the Cameron *Sun-Sentinel,* the president of Cameron's public school board,

and an ardent member of the Cameron Chamber of Commerce, phoned to rage that he hadn't seen the show but he'd heard about it and that Mrs. Townes had been very much out of line with remarks about alleged widespread drug addiction among Cameron's school pupils and its allegedly public silencing, remarks that could only reflect adversely on the city and its citizens. He noted further that the *Sun-Sentinel*, a newspaper in the Kingsley family for five generations, always reported the news fairly and without favor, and furthermore there were certain to be squawks and repercussions of one sort or another from advertisers. Even Barney Frank from the Mayor's office phoned to complain, mildly but unhappily, that any more gratuitous raps at Cameron from anyone representing C.C.S. would not be appreciated.

Ben reported the flak to Fran, and was steaming. "You've been out of college long enough to've learned that your first job, your *first* is to never let anyone euchre you into losing your cool. Of course Arthur Dobbs is a wretched old fart, and of course you had every right and obligation to kick him in the ass. But you went too far and you said too much. By knocking the newspaper and the school board here and in effect all of Cameron for sweeping the kid drug scene under the rug, you poked the wrong finger square into Cameron's eye, and that—"

"Oh? When did Cameron climb off the hook? Did drugs conveniently pass us by?"

"Dammit, Fran, where the hell is your head? We're a private agency and we survive only on the good will and dough from this city, not just from the Federation. Let this town decide we're going around badmouthing it and we might as well turn the office into a barber shop."

"I knocked all cities, not only Cameron."

"The city that matters to me is Cameron."

"I see. What I think you're saying, Ben, is that you'd rather I either shut up or become a sporting lady."

"A wha-at? What the hell're you—"

"A sporting lady will do or say anything to please the men who pay her."

"Goddamn you, get out of here! Let's just hope this blows over."

It didn't.

4

Charlie Forbes assigned Drew Aldridge to cover the arraignment for *Brant's Weekly*, and Cass Lynch to do the followup. There was a transient impulse to simply bury the story, out of consideration for the pain of Vic Donlin, his neighbor and occasional commuter train companion. But the other news weeklies would be dealing with the story, and so there was little choice.

Forbes learned from his sister Marcia, who had learned it from Grace Humphries, that Vic stayed alone in his house, except for lone trips to and from the police station and courthouse; that he had discharged his housekeeper; that seemingly every light in his house stayed on, even through the night; that Grace Humphries had gone to his front door with hot soup and the offer to do anything she could to help but that Vic, looking drawn and ghastly, had barked at her to mind her own business and slammed his door in her face. On the evening of the day after Lewis Brown, Olds, and Dwiggins were arraigned, Forbes stopped at the Donlin house before he went to his own. He pressed the doorbell once and then twice more, in no mood to be cussed but fairly prepared for anything.

The door opened. Vic Donlin, looking indeed drawn and ghastly, in a lumpy, shapeless Indian bathrobe, his feet bare, his normally slick iron gray hair unbrushed and wild, and with several days of beard, regarded Forbes silently for moments that seemed both hostile and quizzical. He stepped back to admit Forbes and, leaving the door open, lumbered into a basically graceful and commodious living room which obviously hadn't been cleaned or straightened in many days. Forbes closed the door and followed him into the forest of clutter. All the immediate doors to closets and rooms were opened wide, as if a burglar had been abruptly called away, and every light in the house did appear to be on. Newspapers and magazines and socks and even a pair of trousers were strewn over the thick wine carpet. A bottle of J & B lay on its side at the portable bar, and a large, dried puddle, surely of whiskey, stained the rug under the bar. On the floor next to an armchair were two 21 Club ash trays, both crammed with cigarette butts. The color television set was on, without sound.

Vic slumped into the armchair, cradled a quarter-filled glass close to his naked, hairy chest, and pantomimed for Forbes to fix himself a drink. Forbes built a light Scotch – there were a dozen bottles on the bar, about half of them empty—and sat on the couch opposite him. Each raised his glass in voiceless, expressionless salute to the other, and drank.

"How's the weather?" Vic asked, gazing blankly past Forbes.

"Letting up. I hear you were doing some fancy flamenco dancing in court the other day."

Vic needed a moment to understand. "On Lewis No-Middle-Initial Brown?" Forbes nodded. "Yeah. It was dumb of me—and you would've done exactly the same thing." He peered at his glass. "I can't get loaded. What do you drink when you're working very hard to drink yourself unconscious and you can't?"

"Just more of it, I guess."

Vic nodded. "You have a kid, don't you? Around Dottie's age?"

"Nancy's sixteen."

"Sixteen. Nice kid? Remembers your birthday?"

"The best there is."

"The best there is. Where is she now?"

Forbes frowned. "Home, I'm sure. I haven't been there yet. I came here first, to say hello."

"To say hello. Suppose she's not at home. Suppose she comes home later and says she's been trying out for the school play. Or doing homework with a girl friend, or having a milk shake with the milk shake crowd. You going to believe her, or are you going to look at her arms for needle marks?"

Tensely, quietly: "Easy now, Vic."

Quietly, nodding: "'Easy now, Vic. Don't speak the unspeakable and the impossible, Vic, you insulting bastard. Nothing like that could happen in my safe little nest. Maybe Vic's, maybe anyone's, but not mine.' Yeah."

Charles Forbes would have smacked any other man who spoke . . . yes, the unspeakable, yes, the impossible. He did nothing. He said nothing.

"A jungle, my friend," Vic said flatly. "That's what we're in. You, too. It's all around us, it's an epidemic. What makes you so sure you're immune?"

Because the epidemic doesn't strike a loving home, a

reasonably stable home, Forbes wanted to answer. "I think I am," he answered.

Vic leaned to his right and picked up a bottle of J & B that Forbes hadn't seen. He filled his glass to the brim, so that some of the Scotch sloshed over the sides of the glass and onto his bathrobe. "Dottie had everything that money could buy, all the care that parents could give. We thought we knew where she was every minute. We didn't leave her to float around. We were building *character* for her. Do you know how long it took to change her from a marvelous child to . . ." His voice choked. "It took one minute. It took one person one minute, one weak minute, to talk her into throwing her life in the sewer. One minute she was the best there is, just like yours is the best there is, like every man's kid is the best there is, and the next minute she was done for." He drank, and coughed. "You like a tip? No, you wouldn't, but here's a tip. Watch your kids like a hawk. They don't know how to watch out for themselves."

Nancy was not at home when Forbes got there.

"She's at the movies with the Byron boy," Marcia said.

"The movies? This is a school night."

"Oh, Charlie, 'school night'! Nancy's sixteen. They'll be home by ten, they went to the seven o'clock picture."

"What picture?"

"Really, Charlie, I didn't give her the third degree. You've met the Byron boy. You like him."

Forbes dismissed Vic Donlin from his mind with some brief success, and nodded. "Yes, you're right. Okay, when's dinner? Do I have time for a shower?"

"Well, fifteen minutes."

Because Vic Donlin had spoken out of grief, because there was absolutely no reason to view Nancy with even the faintest question mark, Forbes resolutely decided to look for no mountain when not even a molehill existed. Showering, he purposely turned his thoughts to Fran Townes, and weighed phoning her. And just as quickly changed his mind.

Too many phone calls, in too short a span of time, and she would begin to get the impression that he was rushing her.

Why not? Because he wasn't. He enjoyed her company, and she apparently enjoyed his, but he wasn't a young swain with the easy option to flee if things got serious. As they could, he realized.

They had spent part of the extremely pleasant drive to Cameron from the Brant's Building trying to trace where they had run into each other before. When he could squeeze the time, Forbes served, without fee, on the boards of Cameron Hospital, the Cameron Free Library, the Nature Museum, and the Sister Juanita Foundling Home, and Fran Townes did volunteer work for some of these when *she* could squeeze the time. A quarter of the way through the drive, she had suddenly snapped her fingers and said, "Malcolm Schumacher," and the light flashed for him and he acknowledged, "Of course." They belonged to the same political party, and each had worked last fall to throw Mayor Ralph DeMott out of office and to get Schumacher in. They had succeeded—they and fifty-two percent of Cameron's voters, but they nonetheless hadn't really ever talked with each other.

She lived on Ballender Avenue, and invited him in for coffee. He went, and met her teenage son, a polite, long-haired boy named Mike, whose handshake was firm and who said he knew Nancy. Forbes stayed for more coffee. The next evening he phoned her and took her to Navarro's for dinner. She was pretty and funny and thoughtful, a working divorcee who didn't wear a sign advertising desperation, and he felt relaxed and young with her, but he came up with a phony, some-other-time excuse when she invited him to her apartment for dinner. He realized that he wanted to sleep with her. No, not just that, but to have an affair, an old-fashioned romance with the trimmings: small presents, weekends in off-season, corny places like Atlantic City, telephone calls to share nothing more pressing than the wisdom or absurdity of the morning's *Times* lead editorial . . . an affair, like he had had with Louise, so long ago.

But he had conscientiously planned to marry Louise, soon after he knew her. He had been twenty-six then, not forty-six, with no crowding responsibilities. He didn't want to marry Fran Townes. Or anyone.

The thought occurred to Charlie Forbes, as he ate Marcia's always reliable meat loaf, that there were times when he was a pompous ass. It was entirely possible that Fran Townes wouldn't want to marry him.

After dinner he went to his study to plow through the day's mail and memos that his secretary Emily had given him to bring home. At five past ten he called to Marcia, "I thought you said Nancy would be home by ten."

"Give them time to get out of the theater, can't you, Charlie? *Hon*estly."

He smoked a cigarette and warned himself to take it easy. Epidemic or not, it obviously didn't automatically follow that any youngster had to be infected, or even affected. Nancy was sixteen years old in a speeding world that Forbes ardently wished he could slow down for her, her and every child. But he had survived the cruel loss of the mother she loved, survived the destruction of a family unit she'd had every right to expect would stay solid and indestructible for many years to come. Her grades weren't bowling anyone over but she was a good student and often according to their late night kitchen klatsches, a creative one. She chose her friends wisely, gently but firmly rejected those who were destructive, and she was very much a productive, concerned, wholesome part of her time; she was active in The Box Project, she wrote reasoned and frequently mature letters to Connecticut congressmen and representatives when she was mad about something (*I doubt if I cared or even knew there were such things as congressmen and representatives when I was sixteen,* he thought), she and her friends participated passionately in peace marches. Forbes didn't fully share all her passions, nor all her methods of seeking social truth and beauty, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that he was father to a very special young person, a person who fussed over how she looked when she went forth to protest what she considered injustices, but who did protest, did act.

There was no cause for worry.

Still, Charlie Forbes wished she were home.

5

The movie broke at nine, but Nancy Forbes and Flip Byron left the theater shortly after eight and drove in silence to Bridewell Park. Nancy wasn't at all certain that she wanted her first lover to be Flip. She was reasonably certain, however, through her tension and fright—waveringly certain—that she was ready. To postpone (*till when? the year 2000?*) something so basic, so meaningful, for reasons that were rationalizations, was to continue sailing aboard the *S.S. Jane Austen.* That ship was headed nowhere. Nancy Forbes was ready at last because . . . She faltered and began again. She was ready because she was ready.

Flip understood that this was to be the night. They had not discussed it, nor did they discuss it now in his parked Chevrolet, yet he understood her embarrassed restlessness in the movie and her willingness to leave early must have been an announcement —and she was relieved that he seemed to be less frightened than she. When the kissing grew too intense, and when the prospect of becoming a woman here in the car struck her as undignified as well as uncomfortable, she murmured, "Let's get out and walk, all right?"

She waited at the side of the car while he went to the trunk, and assumed he was going for a blanket. When she heard the trunk door close, she moved ahead. She had no desire to see the blanket.

In sharp contrast to the brightness of West Street, which they could see below them, a now nearly deserted thoroughfare that looked the way a large house does when all its lights have been anxiously switched on by someone not used to being alone, the park's shadows from the stone walls and trees lent an unbroken, deepening cast to the wide path that Nancy and Flip walked on. The path veered and led into the heart of the park, forbidding in its comparative darkness. They mounted a slight incline to a bench, set back but facing the direction from which they had come. Behind them lay a narrow foot path, used by day as a short cut back to the park's main entrance. Once they seated themselves the trees and bushes seemed to crowd in around them and gave them the feeling of complete seclusion. The evening was cool though pleasant, far pleasanter than the evenings of only a week before had been.

Spreading the blanket took him an eternity. They lowered to it slowly, and kissed again, and she whispered, "Be . . . easy." And he was. She wanted him to stop because she was not ready, because the threshold of the knowledge of forever was a very wrong place to be, after all, and she kissed him harder than he kissed her, and she wondered if the pain would be endurable and if it would wholly transform her and if he had some protection and whether her sudden, involuntary rigidity would stay and disgust him. Patiently — tenderly, tenderly — he caressed her and stroked her hot cheek and her cold thighs, taking time, hurrying nothing, perhaps suffering as his own need mounted but reassuring her with his patience that everything would be all right. She watched the scudding moon, watched its light filter dimly through the trees' thickness, and soon felt something close to passion, as unreal as what he was about to do was unreal.

knew it was unnatural and urgent, wept softly and knew she would not stop him.

Then, abruptly, it was Flip who tensed. He moved his head and said, "Wait. I hear something."

Nancy rolled away and brought her skirt down over her bare thighs, and hastily patted the blanket and grass for the panties she scarcely remembered his having taken off. He was right. There were voices, coming nearer, some talking, one singing, voices and deliberate footsteps. "Be quiet," Flip directed. "They won't see us."

They did. One of them did, a boy, Flip's age or older, huge and alarming, and he called, "Hey now, man, whatta we got here?" Flip's hand gripped Nancy's arm. She sat up quickly, outraged and terrified, and turned away to cloak herself from the light.

"Well, well, well. Flippo! It it isn't Flippo, the groovin' grocery boy!"

Another voice: "Flippeeo Byron! Wow, I thought all Flippeeo balled was a can of Del Monte pineapple!" And laughed, and others laughed. "Hey, let's see who you're groovin', butcher boy! You got your apron on?"

Voices and chortles closer, at least two of them girls' voices and chortles. "Okay, you can all split now," Flip ordered, his own voice husky and unsure. "Show's over." His hand left Nancy's arm and he rose

"Show's over? Show's just *startin'*, baby! C'mon, man, don't hoard all the gold. Let's see who the leading lady is tonight. Come in and—"

"Freeze, Emrich," Flip commanded. "Take all your jelly-head pals and clear out of here, or you're dead."

A girl's ugly peal of laughter and pretended indignity. "Whee-ee, who's calling me names? Who's the frigging vulgarian? Knock him down the stairs, Vince. He insulted me."

Another girl: "Blood in the streets! Up the Irish! Up yours, up mine, hey, who's the chick for real, what's everybody so shy about, laugh, when's somebody gonna laugh?"

Nancy stood on legs of water, still turned, and buckled slightly but not enough to make her fall. She felt a fist of fingers in her hair, and gasped. "Goddamn you, Emrich!" Flip cried, and pushed whoever Emrich was away from her, and she ran in panic toward the car. She hid behind the car, shivering convulsively, sure they were killing him, sure they were coming for her. She hid until she impulsively hurried to the driver's seat, determined to drive to the police, and the key wasn't there, and she thought of running,

anywhere away from here, and started to and stopped because she could not help Flip but she could not leave him. Then she hid behind the car again, and a minute passed — three minutes? one second? one hour? —and she saw Flip walking to her, alone, not in victory but not in escape, carrying his blanket, and she saw that he was safe and she wept and Flip held her.

"It's okay," he said, and guided her to her side of the car and helped her in.

They rode for several minutes before she was able to control her tears, which shamed her, and before he was ready to speak. "It must've been rough for you," he said "I'm sorry."

"Did they hurt you?"

"No. A little scuffle, and he sort of tried to throw a punch, but his heart wasn't in it and it just grazed. That's the thing with grass, you talk big, but you're usually not out to do the muscle but I know a couple of those sloos. We're not tight, I just know them. They turn on about as often as I breathe, and maybe for the same reason. Real freakers." He was silent for a while. He didn't appear to be driving anywhere in particular. "Let's see. Where were we?"

"We were lying on a blanket."

"Yeah. Uh—I've heard of this motel about three miles out of—"

"No."

"Okay."

"Will you take me home, Flip?"

"Okay."

The evening continued to be a horror. On High Branch, they heard a pop and a hiss, and the car wobbled until he pulled off the unlighted road. "Great," he groaned. "A flat. All we need now is a hailstorm and a flood." He had a spare tire, but changing it took time and soft curses because of the darkness, and her watch read well past ten o'clock when they rounded the corner at Ratledge Road. He parked in front of her lighted house and said, gently, "Don't let tonight change anything, Nancy. What we were close to is still right. You believe that, don't you?"

She nodded gravely and squeezed his hand. "I'm going in, Flip. I promised I'd be home by ten, and I don't want to make up any more stories than I have to."

"Tonight put you off for another long time I can tell."

"You can't tell anything about old Moonbeam Forbes.

You can't because I can't. Good night, Flip. I really have to go. Call me?"

"When?"

"Sometime," she said, and combed her hair as she trotted up the lawn to the front door. She unlocked it with her own key and slipped into the powder room to see if Bridewell Park was on her face, if it identified itself anywhere. Her lipstick needed repair and the back of the light coat she had worn on Flip's blanket was obscenely wrinkled, but otherwise she *had* been at the movies, she *had* had a pizza and Coke later with her date. She hung the coat in the hall closet before Daddy or Marcia could see it, and scooped up the barking, welcoming Mop in her arms, and told Marcia, who was preparing to go upstairs and to bed, that she'd had a nice time. She knocked at Daddy's study door, convinced that he already knew everything, and let him kiss her cheek, and told him the movie had been a lot better than Lester Quincy's review of it in *Brant's* had indicated.

"Since when do you read your pappy's magazine?" he asked.

"That's all *you* know. I never read anything else."

"Enjoy yourself? You look a little bashed."

"No, I'm fine. I'm just sorry I'm late; I was talked into an extra slice of pizza and we sat and solved all the world's problems."

"I'll be done here in about ten minutes. Want to gab a while in the kitchen?"

"I'd better not. I worked on my Latin after school, but I want to look it over some more."

"All right. I don't mind being rebuffed for Latin, but don't let it become a habit. Sleep well, darling."

"You too, Daddy."

She snatched the telltale coat from the closet on the way to her room, and stuffed it into her laundry bag. She ran the tub in the second bathroom, and took off her clothes, and was wearily depressed that she had come home without her pants. It was a dirty limerick, or worth one.

In the tub, she tried to wash Bridewell Park off her, and couldn't.

Certainly she would die, of course, she would have to die, if Daddy, adored Daddy, were ever to find out that she was less than the daughter he thought he had, less than the daughter he deserved. She *was* less, she knew; she was unclean and two-faced, each face hypocritical and insin-

cere: there were nights when she sat in the kitchen with Daddy and piously criticized other girls for sins she herself had committed. She was still a virgin, though only technically. During those first months when Mother was in and out of hospitals and when everyone except Nancy suspected what was wrong but no one yet dared to say the word aloud, during those first months when Mother had a weak in bed day and then an unexpectedly robust, tiger-scrapping day, some of the restrictions that Nancy had always complained about but looked for and obeyed were loosened. She discovered petting and then heavy petting, teasing games and furtive experiments with Bob Ingalls, with Russ Kasendorf, with Teddy Case, with Flip Byron, with Ken Orrick. Her parents transferred her from Cameron High (overcrowded, rumors of a drug problem growing) to Miss Barnaby's (all-girl student body, exorbitantly expensive tuition, sterling scholastic reputation), but the Bobs and the Flips and the Kens didn't disappear; they were very much around, at dances, at Saturday and Sunday protest meetings and envelope stuffing sessions. She had let Bob Ingalls kiss her breasts, and she had let some of the others go farther—not all the way, but farther. And she would come home and tell Daddy that she was sickened by girls she knew who had no self-respect and who fooled around.

Do I ever do anything that's halfway grown up? she thought.

Yes. Sometimes I learn things.

She had blown grass once, exactly once, the day after Daddy had driven her to the beach and they had walked on the sand, under a clear, shining sky, in the reluctant warmth of late afternoon, and he had verified what, until that afternoon, she had suspected but refused to face: that Mother was going to die. The next day, after school, in Gretchen Hoff's bedroom, she let Gretch teach her how to suck in the smoke and hold it deep in her lungs. Presently it helped to blot up some of the rage at losing Mother, it even helped her to pretend that the hideous, passing thought of having Daddy all to herself had not been thought. Her response to it was a remotely gratifying one, fuzzily melancholy, pleasurable, worrisome, giddy; sensations remote and abruptly, perversely crystal. Colors became graphically and gorgeously clear, and every perception became profound. She walked home, pausing only to smell the trees growing, and entered her house, giggling at nothing, cuddling and rocking Mop in her arms and chattering at him, afraid to

go to Mother's room but afraid of little else. Daddy came home early—he was working more at home now—and tolerantly watched her, and must have supposed that she was behaving the nutty way she was as a boomerang reaction to the news about Mother.

The recognition of this, when the effects wore off, cheapened and distressed her. When she wakened the following morning, Mother was still going to die, whether Nancy swore to never touch grass for the rest of her life or not. She swore it, nonetheless. To giggle at nothing, to recall her profound perceptions and realize that they hadn't been at all unusual, to be happy without being happy, all of it was fine for Gretch Holt and Libby Auslander and the others—if it was. It wasn't for Nancy Forbes.

This past New Year's Eve, Daddy had let her go to Gretch's house on Baltimore Drive, nine blocks away, with Shep Hubbard, on the clear understanding that Shep was to bring her home before one. She offered to stay home—Mother's absence was still hurtfully fresh—but Daddy insisted: "Have a ball, princess. I know the Holts, and I know your friend Shep's father, so I'm fairly confident you won't be whisked overseas and forced into a spy ring. Just don't make me embarrass you by calling at half-past one and demanding to know why the hell you're not home and in bed."

Daddy knew Gretch's mother and father, or thought he did. What he didn't know was that they prided themselves on having wiped out the generation gap, parents who were convinced that the surest way to ease their children into mature and responsible adulthood was to give them the longest rope possible, repeat the hymn, "We trust you," to them daily, and automatically assume that the jigsaw of growing would be complete, with every piece of the puzzle fitted into place, none missing.

The party for twelve couples was held in Gretch Holt's basement, a gimmicky and splashy series of rooms with a billiard table, two color TV sets, an ivory baby grand, an acre of food, wall-to-wall carpeting, piped-in music, gadgets upon extravagant and useless and glittery gadgets—and no adults, and the promise that no adults would come clumping down to look in, for to do that would naturally suggest a betrayal of trust. Doug Pryor and Andy Markham produced enough grass to turn all of North Cameron on.

A quarter of the kids didn't turn on, including Nancy and Shep, although Doug pressured them and Shep glanced at Nancy for either approval or disapproval, neither of which

she gave. Doug Pryor, high and loose, a senior at Susquehanna and a phenomenal pianist, ambled to the baby grand, and those near the piano gathered around him. "Man, I am blowing the greatest, but the ultimate greatest chords since Joey Bach," he announced obviously meaning it. His long, thin fingers hit awful clinkers, and his placid grin said he didn't notice them.

Soon before one o'clock, Nancy and Shep left the party because she confided to Shep that she'd had enough. On the way to Rutledge Road she said, "I'm sorry for pooping out so early, Shep, but I'm either too straight or not straight enough for those games. I've heard Doug play, and he's right, he *is* the greatest. But what good is grass, what good is *he*, if grass makes him hear chords in his head and think everyone else hears them, too?"

"Was it just Pryor that switched you off?" Shep asked.

"No. I guess being square in general switched me off. I've decided I don't want to groove with a gang like that. It's not only the childish way they look at grass—with that oh-boy-aren't-we hip stuff, as if they'd just discovered it, before anyone else. It's all the childishness, Pat Ronan with her bra off to prove what a big swinger she is, then Sally Ives with those stupid jokes that everybody has to laugh at, funny or not, the filthier the better, everybody has to do it or everybody will think they're square. And blowing smoke till they're cross-eyed. People who don't know when to stop can get to be such a big fat drag of a bore."

At her front door the first of Shep Hubbard's good night kisses was delicate and chaste. Nancy turned it into a soul kiss, a deep and aggressive and ardent one, and unbuttoned both their overcoats and ground her torso against him. Shep seemed stunned. She smiled mischievously and said, "I just didn't want you to go away thinking your date tonight was Queen Victoria com*pletely*."

Swabbing a soapy washcloth experimentally across her breasts and over her flanks now, Nancy thought of Flip and felt sorry for him, wondered how he was going to relieve himself, whether he would drive to some prostitute, or what. Some boys she had worked up and not gone all the way with had complained that not being finished off opened the door to all kinds of physiological calamities. She believed none of them, believed all of them, couldn't be certain of whom to believe, what to believe.

About anything, she suspected. Did boys go berserk if they didn't have orgasms on physical demand?

What about men? What about a man like Daddy, she thought guiltily—a widower, still young, with too much self-respect to go to a prostitute, no matter how oppressive his need?

A man like Daddy would get married.

Nancy left the tub, toweled herself dry, and got into the ribbony turquoise shortie nightgown that Marcia clucked about and thought scandalous. Daddy had the right to marry again.

No, he didn't. Not yet. Not for a long, long while.

She brushed her teeth, not looking into the mirror, and resolutely strode to her bedroom desk, where tomorrow's Latin waited. She closed the book and hurried under her bed covers. Before Bridewell Park, and in Bridewell Park, this body had tingled, in want, in confusion, in quick gusts of passion. Now it was a body and nothing more, and she was relieved.

6

"What you have to understand about the Russkies," said Fred Byron, Senior, at the wheel of the Buick, "is that they're not like us."

It was a Thursday evening in May, one week before Monica Spencer was to arrive in Cameron and East Bank Road. The supermarket had been open till nine, and business had been brisk. The dashboard's clock read ten of ten, and both son and father were tired. Flip had gone to the store after school and done whatever was needed, stamping prices on cans, delivering orders in the panel truck, helping to unpack crates, manning the checkout registers. He worked as an employee, not the boss's son, but his wages were fair, and as long as he didn't have to run into the old man too often (the old man worked twice as hard, without a break, as anyone in the store), the job was a tolerable one.

On this evening, the old man was in one of his talkative moods, though with a curious difference: he seemed eager, as he had not seemed for a very long while, to revive a closeness with Flip, a closeness that had long ago skipped town. Flip sensed it now, although it wasn't voiced, and tried to understand why it was happening tonight.

He waited, silent. The old man was fighting the Commie Conspiracy out loud, a hobby he indulged himself in as

other men might talk baseball. Feeling and puzzling the curious and unexpected mood rather than tuning in to the peabrain oration, Flip Byron was again aware that his father truly didn't know what to make of him, that he was a disappointment to his father who wanted all his sons to be like the oldest one, Howie, the klutz with the unswerving allegiance to Country, God, and Pop.

Once, to please his mother, Flip had attempted to please the old man. Two years ago he had gone with his father to the Carl Keene Fellowship's annual Father and Son Dinner at Castle Hall. The Lord's Prayer was read, the flag was saluted, and a pale little man with thin, hollow cheeks and great deep sunken eyes was introduced as "Mr. Gifford Claffey, an expert in the field of Atheistic International Communism, who will now address you young lads And maybe your Dads aren't too old to learn some new tricks too, heh heh heh" The Dads laughed and clapped their hands, and Flip looked around and saw that some of the other boys there were a dozen in all, ranging in age from about six to about nineteen were laughing, too Mr Gifford Claffey spoke for an agonizing hour, explaining and warning All You Fine Young Americans about the perils of Atheistic International Communism and its witting and unwitting handmaidens.

Flip studied his father, who sat rapt When Mr. Gifford Claffey was done, the applause was thunderous. Flip didn't move. His father scowled and rose with the others in ovation The meal was rubber chicken, and the boys drank hot chocolate while the men drank beer. In the car on the way home, his father said, "A terrific evening, right?"

"I thought it stank," Flip said. "Listen, Dad, do you really fall for that stuff?"

The old man had nearly driven off the road. In the house, as Mom watched *Petticoat Junction*, he'd roared about modern kids today, about how easy it would be within a few years for the enemy to just mosey in and take over if the kids today were a sample of American spine and muscle. Flip had escaped to his room.

Now his father was explaining the Russkies.

"What you don't ever want to do is get me wrong. One thing about me, I never say boo unless I know what I'm talking about But you know why we call them The Russian Bear: because that's what they are Bears. Get close enough to try and be friendly, and you'd come away without a hand. Uncle Sam saved their life during old Hitler and the

Japs, and they thanked us by stabbing us in the back every chance they got. They're still at it, and they'll keep at it till we decide to wake up and kick them in the you-know-where. They're not civilized, they don't know how to keep a promise because that's in their nature. Twenty-five, thirty million of their own people they've slaughtered since Joe Stalin—not only other countries, but their very own people. They don't believe in God, and there's your tipoff right there: people that think they know more than a church, well, what they end up knowing is nothing. They go in for this free love, they call it, this hoochie koochie stuff. What do you do with a bear, try to talk sense to it? Hell, no!"

Then, scarcely missing a beat, he said, "Listen, Freddie, I want to ask you something."

Flip blinked. "About the Russians?"

"About you and I. I'm your Dad, you're my boy, we're flesh and blood. How come we're always at each other's throats? I don't get a kick out of it. Do you get a kick out of it?"

" . . . No."

"We used to be partners, one for all and all for one, you remember that? You used to like me, you used to call me Champ. All of a sudden you turned out to be a snotnose, a kid I don't even recognize. But I'd cut off my arms and legs for you. Do you know that, or don't you know that?"

Jesus, Dad, let me love you. Let's be those partners again . . .

"I know," Flip said. "I guess I know. Maybe we just never tried hard enough to understand and respect each other's point of view about things."

"What things? It's been a long time since I graduated from Harvard and wrote a whole lot of books, but nobody's called me a dummy lately. What things? Let's put the cards out on the table, like they say, and see where we're at. What do I do, what do I say that makes me out to be some type of a bum in your eyes?"

"You're not a—"

"Don't tell me. I walk in the same room where you are, and I feel it. 'Here he comes, some type of a bum.' What did I do that makes me so rotten, so beneath you? I see that you have food to eat and clothes to wear—is that where I went wrong? I never learned how to talk like a professor because I went to work before I was old enough to spell my name—is that the crime you want me to get down on my knees and beg you to forgive me for?"

Even when you're seriously trying to be decent, to really talk, why do you have to put up barbed wire?

"I'm addressing myself to you, big shot."

"What do you want to hear?" Flip quietly pleaded. "I know you try to do the right thing."

"More than most fathers. My father ran out on my mother when I was half your age. He gambled and guzzled every red cent he made off the railroad, and one fine day he up and left for good. My mother, your grandmother, she was too proud to go work at Kresge's five and dime, and when I and my sisters had ice cream or cake for dessert, that was the treat of the year. Don't you make me out to be all that miserable a character. I worked my ass off, pardon my French. I'm not John D. Rockefeller, but what I earned I earned, from the time I was half as old as you, and I never cheated a man in my life. Is that such a rotten thing to put on my tombstone?"

"No."

"You don't talk a whole lot these days, do you?"

"No."

"Why? I'm tryin' to have a conversation with you. What's with this cat and you, and I don't know? Who's the dummy around here?"

"I am."

A long, tense pause. Then "All right, kid. Maybe I got on too much."

A longer pause. Finally, uncomfortably: "You know, Freddie, you've got a hell of a long list. Tell me something I don't know. You had any trouble yet?"

Flip automatically looked at his father. What the hell . . . ?

The old man grinned. "Don't carry tales out of school. I understand. Your business is your business. You interested to know when I had my first piece? You breathe a word of this to your mother, I'll massacre you. I was your age, just come seventeen. Workin' day and night, but not *all* night, if you get what I mean." He squeezed Flip's knee. "Well, I won't go into the details, but this gal was a nurse, over in Bridgeport. I looked twenty-one, twenty-two, and I was built like a tank, just like you. Well, sir, to make a long story short, I jazzed that nurse over in Bridgeport a full month and a half, every chance I had, till she found out how old I was. She was looking to get hitched, see, and she cussed me out a blue streak. What I'm bringing out, I had plenty of lady friends for a night or two till I met your mother –and I'll swear on any Bible I never glanced at

another woman from the day I met your mother—but I'm here to tell you the high point of my life, the highest, was with that nurse over in Bridgeport. Because I was young. It wouldn't've been the same if I was a couple years older. No, it wouldn't've been the same thing at all. Some days I forget things, some days I'm not what you'd call the happiest man in the world. But I remember that nurse. I remember the name of the perfume she put on, I remember the names of the picture shows I took her to, I could reel you off whole conversations we had, word for word. And all this is more than thirty years ago.

"Sow the oats when you're young, Freddie. You're a young bull full of beans such a goddamn short time. Just make sure you keep your name clean, and just make sure she's clean. I don't care how hot and bothered you get; always make sure first that she's clean."

Fred Byron, Senior, braked the Buick to a stop in front of the house, but he made no move to get out. He looked older now than he had at four o'clock this afternoon, just before business had spurted in almost every aisle. His face seemed heavier, with deep folds of skin about his wide mouth and hard lines just above his brows.

"I've never told this to anyone, Freddie," he said slowly, "maybe because I don't have the kind of a friend you can talk turkey to. Never did, I guess; always too busy keeping two steps ahead of the bills. But your mother . . ."

Flip waited, breath held.

"Your mother is the finest person that ever walked this earth. Always respect her, Freddie. She's one in a million."

Then he took his elbows off the steering wheel and was resolute. "Come on, kid, let's go in," he said. "I haven't had a bite to eat since noontime, and I'm starved."

After Bridewell Park, Flip phoned Nancy a number of times. She wasn't frosty, but each time he called she had, or expected to have, something on the griddle that wouldn't free her for a minute for the next week, and then the next. "You're ducking me," he accused finally. "Like it was my fault those grubs showed up in the park that night."

"Oh, stop it! Don't be childish. I'm up to my ears, Flip, that's all. You know I like you."

"That night you said you loved me. Or you acted like you did."

"Please, Flip . . ."

" 'Please, Flip' what? Do I see you tomorrow or don't I?"

". . . Not tomorrow. Don't press, Flip. I'm busy. I have seventy dozen things I'm involved in right now."

"Fermine. Congratulations, Nancy. Keep up the good work. Maybe I'll see you around."

" . . . Flip . . . "

"Yeah?"

" . . . Nothing."

"See you, Nancy."

In six weeks, Cameron High would close down for the summer and he would have all of July and August before his senior year.

Well, to hell with his senior year. He would go till the end of June and then make the break for good. He had a couple of hundred in the bank, enough to take him somewhere deep into Mexico, somewhere warm and cheap where his ass wouldn't get chewed every hour on the hour, where he could be left alone when he wanted that and be among people when he wanted them. He remembered enough basic Spanish to get by, and he'd find a girl who could teach him more.

He reread *The Shell*, the play he'd written last year in the basketball time. He still hadn't shown it to anyone, even Miss Calbano, his junior-year English teacher and the only teacher he'd ever had with any genuine imagination. It was pretty crappy in spots, too many spots, but the spine of it was strong, here and there it sang out and jumped right off the pages, and it was workable. It was something that belonged to him, something he could breathe life into.

Locks didn't keep him in Cameron, locks or bars or concrete walls. Hanging around in the lobby another year, waiting for the future to begin, was slow, planned suicide. He would take his play and his determination to be somebody special away from Cameron. There, somewhere, he would meet someone more special, and that someone would dig, really dig, the soul and the rage and the man that were Flip Byron.

Then, at the end of May, he began to deliver phoned in orders to East Park Road, where the movie actress Monica Spencer had just moved.

Chapter 3

1

On plea day, at Lewis Brown's preliminary hearing in Circuit Court, Assistant District Attorney Noel Ingram called to the witness stand Chief of Detectives Neal Trewitt and Police Officer Rafe Stonewall, who testified that they had witnessed an exchange of money and a glassine bag between Lewis Brown and Barry Dwiggins. Neal Trewitt further testified, "I had part of the specimen sent to the State Toxicological Lab in Hartford for field testing. I've received their written report. It definitely indicates that the substance in the glassine bag is heroin. Here is the report."

Lewis Brown was advised by Circuit Court Judge Aaron Kohn that he had the right to either request or waive a hearing for probable cause. Brown's attorney, Willard Cannon, demanded a quick hearing and a reduction in bond, pleading that his client, unable to guarantee the excessive bail of $25,000, had been forced to remain behind bars since his arraignment. Cannon also entered a motion that the evidence seized be suppressed, in that the seizure had been unconstitutional. Judge Kohn heard both attorney's arguments, rejected Cannon's suppression motion but lowered the bond to $10,000, and ruled, "I find probable cause. The court binds the accused over to the next session of Superior Court."

"How does it look?" Lewis Brown asked his brother-in-law, Willard Cannon, after the hearing and after the bond was posted. "It looks good that he lowers the bond, don't it?"

"All it means is that the judge seems fairly satisfied you're not going to skip," answered Cannon, who cared for his sister Maxine but not at all for Maxine's husband. "Just wipe that grin off your face. And make double damn sure that between this minute and the minute I take you to Superior Court, you stay out of any and all trouble. Don't cross

against the light, and put your chewing gum in the litter basket. Keep that nose cleaner than it's ever been."

"What's with this Superior Court? Why they moving me?"

"I've told you a dozen times since the arraignment, and that's what worries me: you either don't understand me, or you don't listen, or both," Willard Cannon said wearily. "This isn't a traffic violation, Lew. I can't seem to penetrate that moron skull of yours what a peck of trouble you're in. The sale of narcotics is a felony, and a felony that carries a conviction of five years or more is beyond the jurisdiction of the Circuit Court. And by the way, I've watched that D.A., Ingram, play to a jury; he can be a barracuda. From where I sit, I figure you have just three possibilities working in your favor, slim ones. One, you're a family man with a steady job all these years, never convicted, never even arrested before this. Two, with luck we could get a judge who's not out to hang you."

"What's the third?"

"Olds and Dwiggins. Those cops that testified against you are going to testify again, and they sure as hell won't do your case any good. But Olds and Dwiggins . . . if they get scared in court and talk . . . well, let's cross the finger that they'll keep their mouths nice and shut."

"Oh, they'll do that, Will," Lewis Brown assured him. "One thing about cops like them: they know if they rat, word gets around their crowd, and nobody likes a rat."

"Yeah. What else do they have to protect but a good reputation?" Cannon remarked dryly. Then, "Jesus Christ, Lew, what got into you to peddle *dope*? And to *kids*? You wouldn't answer me when I asked you right after you were booked, and I didn't follow it up because I figured you had enough headaches. But will you answer me now? You make a decent living. Maxine's part-time job helps out. If it wasn't for Maxine, I wouldn't take your case for all the rice in China. What got *into* you?"

Lewis Brown shrugged. "The extra money, what else? Who don't like extra money? I've busted my back for twenty years in that kraut bakery, and yeah, for a decent living like you call it, but what do I show for it? Free crullers and a new suit every three, four years. If I don't deal, somebody else deals. And don't give me about your sister Maxine, Will. Your sister Maxine didn't like where the extra money was coming from when I finally told her, but she sure learned fast how to go on shopping sprees."

"Your kids," said Cannon. "What if any of them decided to take dope? Wouldn't that break your heart?"

"Oh, that wouldn't ever happen in a million years," Lewis Brown declared proudly. "My kids are good kids. We've always raised them right."

Chester Olds' and Barry Dwiggins' lawyers were advised that if the boys cooperated with the police, a strong recommendation would be made that both be treated lightly, as first offenders. Olds and Dwiggins refused to talk to the police.

Then Chester Olds, a school dropout who worked as a mechanic at Chuck's Garage in South Cameron, and whom Judge Kohn had reluctantly freed in an aunt's recognizance, did not appear at his job for two days in a row. Chief of Detectives Neal Trewitt and Officer Rafe Stonewall went to his home on Brewster Street, a shabby, dark, cluttered apartment above Farranti's Barber Shop

Olds' aunt, Marie Garth, a slatternly looking woman with wild red-gray hair, smelled of liquor and was abusive. "What'm I, his nursemaid?" she croaked, not entirely steady on her heavy feet. "He lives here when he lives here, and when he don't, he don't. I got enough to do taking care of myself, let alone him. You nosy cops go away and leave me rest."

"When did you see him last?" Stonewall asked.

"Yesterday, maybe, two days ago. I *told* you: he comes and goes."

"Are any of his clothes, any of his belongings, missing?"

"Goddammit, I mind my own business, which is what I wish you'd do. Now I want you to scat and leave a person be." To Stonewall, who was black, she added, "All I need's for the neighbors to poke their heads out the door and think I'm entertaining colored folks in my home." She slammed her door.

An all-points bulletin was sent out for the capture of Chester Olds.

On his own time, Neal Trewitt visited the luxurious Dwiggins home in the Overridge section of Cameron. Mrs. Dwiggins, a slender, pretty, obviously well-bred lady, recognized him before he identified himself, and she was reasonably civil but she crisply refused to discuss her son or to let Trewitt see him. "I've looked into these matters, Officer," she said in a Vassar voice. "Unless you have a subpoena

with you, you have no legal right to be here. My boy is suffering enough as it is."

Warren Dwiggins' insurance office was on West Street. He admitted Trewitt into his private office, and listened to Trewitt, and said, "I appreciate that you have a job to do, but how can you expect me to say or do anything that can only hurt my son?"

Trewitt told him about Chester Olds. "If Olds isn't picked up by the trial date, Mr. Dwiggins, your son is going to be awfully cold and lonely in that courtroom."

Dwiggins frowned, clearly moved. After a moment he said, slowly, "I've tried as hard as I know how to reach Barry, to make him understand the possible consequences he faces—that our whole family faces—if he doesn't explain why he was in that lot that night. He swears up and down to Mrs. Dwiggins and myself that he's innocent, and of course he is—what would a fine kid with everything he wants and needs be doing pushing drugs? He's a smart kid, but I just can't get to him. But I won't let you get to him, either, and make him admit to something he's innocent of. The only answer is that he's protecting some—why, I can't imagine, and I've told him so a hundred times. But I'm satisfied he'll clear it all up in his own good time."

"Excuse me, sir, but that attitude won't help him at all. If—"

"Excuse *me*, sir," Dwiggins said, suddenly tighter, his frown deeper, "but you're not about to give me orders on how to deal with my boy. Will you go now? I have a desk full of work."

2

Monica Spencer, her old Persian cat Willo, and her housekeeper, Brigid Carmody, flew to New York and then were driven to Cameron, Connecticut, only after Monica was assured and reassured that her new home was in order, that every crate and packing case and last hint of movers was gone and the fifteen-room house was ready to be lived in. She had told Billy Gillette in precise detail what she wanted, and Billy had enlisted his trusty East Coast scouts to find it. She had come to see it, three months before, had fallen in love with it, and bought it. Billy had cautioned that the

cost and the upkeep would be stratospheric. "I'll take in roomers," she answered.

From a distance, the white rough stone house stood out commandingly because of its wide, free position in a high clearing surrounded by nine acres of sloping hills; the house rose, stretched, belonged where it was as surely as if it had been planted. The lavish interior had no end nor beginning, for the exterior walls of the lower rooms were glass, making each room wondrously bright and at one with the always spectacular country view outside. "It's all just too big, if you ask me," Brigid grumbled.

"Ridiculous," Monica scoffed, thrilled and delighted with the living room's huge stone fireplace, the simple arrangement of deep, comfortable chairs and couches in cool blends of yellow, chartreuse and aqua, her home's hominess—thrilled and delighted with everything. "Just think of all the elephants we can store here in the wintertime."

Many times during that first week and beyond, Monica waited for the letdown. Doubts came, because she assumed they were supposed to, but they did not linger. Brigid continued to grumble and complain that the house and grounds needed an army-sized staff of servants, but a maid named Isobel and a caretaker-chauffeur named Abraham were hired - Isobel full time, Abraham on call—and soon, under Brigid's watchful, stern direction, Monica's house (*Monica's house, Monica's house,* she said repeatedly and happily as she had never been able to say *Monica's house* easily and completely about her home in Holmby Hills) was being run with polished smoothness.

Monica had left California when sun and rain had become equally oppressive. She basked in *Monica's house,* reveled in it. She hiked over every foot of her grounds, deep into the thickness of the woods, frequently losing her way and then coming upon the sudden green of open pasture; she called hello to robins and sparrows and squirrels; she was acutely, joyously conscious of inexhaustible health, of new, pencil-point perceptions, of a fundamental calm and affection for herself that she had not experienced anywhere else. She read. She reflected. On sunny days she swam in her long, rectangular pool, back and forth a dozen times each day, quickly and spiritedly. She composed mushy letters in her head to her copper beech and weeping beech and white birch trees. She located the stevedore appetite she had mislaid twenty years earlier, and her sleep at night was, marvel of inexplicable marvels, uninterrupted and glorious.

She found herself drinking little, and occasionally, not at all.

One afternoon she walked into Brigid's kitchen just as a hard-muscled, beautiful boy was setting two fat bags of groceries on a table. He didn't see her. She visualized him inside of her—and realized that the picture interested her but didn't particularly stir her.

For the first time that she could remember, she enjoyed being alone for long, contemplative periods, felt thoroughly, almost thoroughly, at peace in her own company.

God, she thought with detached amusement and wry wonder, I'm getting so sickeningly square and wholesome they'll elect me president of the 4-H Club next.

She laughed.

Monica zealously guarded her unlisted telephone number, but Gordon Whitehall found it and called her from New York. Gordon was a producer, often an immensely successful one; two of his five Broadway plays and musicals had been smashes, and when he wasn't producing for Broadway or London, he was doing it for television. They had been friends and on-the-run lovers from the time he'd produced *Tribal Dance*, one of Monica's Oscar pictures, seventeen or eighteen years before. She was glad to hear his voice, but she wished he had waited another month or so to call, when she would be 4-H's president for real.

"Cruno, amoeba, nameless dog of an unnamed disease," Gordon said. "So close to the city all these weeks and you couldn't find a minute to ring up the only genius you ever truly worshipped! For shame. How are you, Ugly?"

"Just blooming, Poppy," she answered exuberantly. "The reason I haven't rung you, or *anyone*, before this is that I've been busy playing games with trees and rabbits."

"You'd still sleep with anything, won't you? Look, why don't you invite me out there to the sticks one of these nights? Matter of fact, invite us all out. Some of us are on the Coast or the Continent, and some of us aren't speaking to each other, and too damn many of us are dead, but there's enough of the gang around town—Herbie Graham, Buckeye, Lush-woman Pants Lisa and her fifty-seventh undying love this month . . ."

What the hell, she thought. Why not?

"You set it up, will you darling—how many and what night?" she offered. "I'll bake the cookies and squeeze the lemons."

"My lemons, I trust."

"Whose, then?"

The party for twelve friends turned into a party for thirty-eight friends, some of whom she knew, all of whom she sincerely and effusively welcomed. A clucking Brigid hovered over the Cameron Caterers' waiters and bartenders, and Monica wore a flared skirt and her best party-giving humor; and she couldn't imagine why she had so long postponed what was so clearly a revival meeting of the Good Times.

Gordon Whitehall brought with him a tawny, scrawny, high-cheekboned, almond-eyed, blank-faced, utterly gorgeous girl he introduced as, "Tamara Rolanov, of the Kiev Rolanovs, who will star in my new drama, *Stormy Keester.*" The girl wafted off to the buffet table and Monica asked, "Why is her name Tamara? Because she never comes?"

"Don't talk smutty about my personal future bride."

"No, *really,* darling? Are you plunging again? Which one will this be—the third?"

"Shh. The fourth. Unhallowed, isn't it? I'm not sure if I'll plunge again, actually. She's kvetching to be the next Mrs. Whitehall, and a shade too aggressively. She plans to marry me, charging extreme cruelty."

"If at first you don't succeed . . ."

Gordon nodded. He was forty-seven years old, Monica's age almost to the day, and he was still pleasant to look at, though his full mustache and sparse hair were now white and his once-beautiful hands were blue-veined and pudgy. He regarded Monica as a waiter brought him a vodka martini and her bourbon and said, "The last time you and I were alone was in an Excelsior suite in Rome. You were singing *Mournin' Low* in a voice that sounded like a cow being milked with cold fingers, and I was kissing your legs."

"You have a lousy memory, puppy," she declared, trying not to look at his pudgy hands.

"I *wasn't* kissing your legs?"

"Yes, but I was singing *Cabin in the Sky* and my voice was never better."

"How about singing for me tonight?"

The question was flip—she hoped—and Monica was relieved. "Oh, I haven't sung in months," she purred. "I'm rusty."

"All the more reason you should hurry back in harness. And speaking of harnesses, bra-type harnesses, my compliments on the one you're wearing. You *are* wearing one, aren't you, Ugly?"

"Yes, as you damned well remember I have to," she said with perhaps a too-girlish grin. Change the subject, she thought, change it fast. I have no intention of chasing into the hay, with you, with anyone. "Excuse me for a while, pappy. One of the bartenders over there is getting sloshed."

The party, Monica decided before midnight, when she was drunk though still intensely conscious, had been, was, a frightful mistake. The East Coast gang she had loved and had always relied on to share the fun were milling and chattering, laughing it up, drinking it up, youthing it up as fervently as the last time she had been East, and the time before that, and all the times before that. But the fun was missing, the gay spontaneity was missing. No one was young anymore—no one but the newborn Tamaras, who weren't young in the glowing, vivid way all the others had once been young and yet everyone was playing young, fumbling the ball as they played, aging kids who held onto their illusions for dear life. She drank with them, and laughed with them, and despised herself for being secretly so critical when she knew she was as empty as they, and resolved that after this grimly anachronistic night she would, by God, truly get cracking and grow up.

By midnight, most of the guests were happy-singing drunk and those who weren't in the living room or adjacent rooms were no doubt off in private quarters of the house, inventing sex. By midnight, Gordon Whitehall was in one of the guest rooms, passed out. By midnight, Monica had drunk so much, so compulsively and so joylessly, that she abruptly left Bruce Hastings, who was punctuating his belabored point that he was one director who would never be a television sellout by circling his palms over her buttocks, to go to her bedroom john where she was sure she was going to be sick. She negotiated the stairs without too much difficulty and opened her bedroom door. The night table light was on, and Tamara Rolanov of the Kiev Rolanovs and an unidentifiable man with an industrious backside were pretzeling on her bed. She wanted to run, to leave them alone. She didn't.

Gordon's tawny, scrawny, gorgeous young lady saw her and bleated, "Okay, butt out! This isn't some peep show!"

Enraged, Monica switched on the ceiling light. The man – Tim Peary, a screenwriter she had slept with back in the Eighteenth Century and thought herself in love with for perhaps an hour—fell away and blinked, and Monica cried, "*You* butt out, both of you! When I'm ready to turn this place into a whore house I'll send you invitations. But for

now, out!" Tim Peary obediently got to his feet, but the girl merely sat up, her young, lovely eyes cold with arrogance and anger. The fact that the girl didn't move immediately further enraged Monica, and she stalked to the side of the bed - her bed—and roughly grabbed the girl's arm. 'God damn you, did you *hear* me, you repulsive bitch?" she roared. "I want you out of my bed and out of my house now!"

The girl struggled, surely frightened yet obviously determined to leave only when she chose the moment. She fought the hand. Monica furiously yanked her from the bed by her hair, two savage fistfuls of it, and pushed her to the floor, and Tim was meekly declaring, "Wait a minute, Mon, that rough stuff isn't necess—"

"Out of here, *out!*" Monica thundered and dragged the naked, suddenly weeping girl by the hair toward the door, and stormed about the room, swooping up a slip and a necktie here, a pair of trousers and a dress there, and pitched them into the hall and shouted, "Out, out, out, out, out!" She slammed the door after them and paced feverishly, trembling, close to inexplicable tears, and sat for a time on the window seat, needing a cigarette, needing a drink, aghast at her lunatic behavior. Then the fury returned, and she charged to the head of the stairs and bawled down in a voice that was agitated and strident, "I want every one of you to leave my house at once! I want all of you rejects to put down my food and my liquor and round up all the screwers and the sleeping drunks and take them and yourselves as far away from my house as you can get! At once! There's not one of you I want to see, now or ever again!"

She strode back to her bedroom, alarmed by the violent beats in her heart, and locked the door, and uncapped the Jack Daniel's that she kept in her bureau, and greedily drank from the bottle.

Far too early the next afternoon, Monica wakened with a diabolical hangover and the firm resolution that she would never drink again. She accepted no calls from any of the New York gang, those who apparently believed she hadn't been entirely serious when she'd ordered them all away, but within the week, she did begin to take calls and respond to appeals from earnest people eager for Monica Spencer to contribute her name and time to this worthy benefit and that good cause. She made records for the blind, reading poetry and the classics. Abraham drove her to both St. Agnes and Cameron Hospitals, two or three times a week, and she

sat with elderly, terminal, scared patients, and listened to them, and frequently cheered them, and read to them, and absorbed herself in their self-absorptions.

But giving was not enough, she knew. Moving from day to day without glue was not enough, and her restlessness and loneliness grew increasingly oppressive.

There came the morning in June, then, dressed in a beach robe and nothing else, when she carried a towel to the pool and tucked her black hair inside her bathing cap. She was about to remove the robe and mount the metal steps to the diving board when she heard and saw a truck pull up to the driveway. The hard muscled, beautiful boy hopped out and lifted a heavy cardboard box with equally beautiful ease. He had stepped not out of a dusty delivery truck but a Parthenon frieze, and Monica realized that she was both interested and stirred.

Swiftly turning her head away, pretending she hadn't seen him, she dropped her robe and climbed the steps — slowly — to the high board. She paused at the edge of the board above the water, wryly thinking, *Well, early Hollywood Monica, you blunt old vamp, you*, and, sure she was being observed, dove cleanly into the pool.

3

Frohlich's Bakery on Arctic Street fired Lewis Brown. "Too many complaints to me personal from the regular trade," Fritz Frohlich told Brown.

"Hell's sake, Fritz, what type justice do you call that? How'm I expected to support my family?"

The German shrugged. "Go sell dope. I run a business here. Customers I need more than I need vun baker."

"All these years I've been here—"

"*Ja*, und get paid tair, too. You need money, you could have come to Fritz, I would have loaned. You guilty, not guilty, I don't know, I don't care. I run a business for my customers."

At home on Stover Avenue, Lewis Brown told his wife that the kraut had canned him, after all these years.

"What'll we *do*? How're we supposed to *live*?" Maxine complained. "Why'd you have to get mixed up in that rotten dope stuff in the first place?"

"Yeah, I seem to remember you didn't carry on too hard

when I started bringing in that extra money. You didn't call me too bad a guy while you were spending it."

"*Spending* it? Don't hand me that. The little you brought in. I spent on the house. I spent on *necessities!* We needed that refrigerator. Anita needed those braces for her teeth. Don't make out like I was running around like some debutante."

"Well, you got your damned refrigerator."

Fran Townes discovered that she was involved in the Dorothy Jean Donlin case after all.

At Cameron Community Service, as one of its four full-time caseworkers, she treated an average of seven clients a day, those who could pay well, those who could pay moderately, and those who could afford to pay little or nothing at all. One of her clients whom she had been seeing at 5 P.M. on Tuesdays and Fridays for nearly a year, was Barry Dwiggins.

After his arrest, Barry skipped two sessions without phoning, but he came the third time nervously and sheepishly. He was sixteen years old, her son Mike's age and of Mike's time, yet a vastly different kind of young man, a wealthy man's son with a wealthy man's son's set of complicated problems. He had been brought originally by his mother, who prattled to Fran as he sank deeper and deeper into his chair, "Barry is a brilliant boy—he takes after his father in that regard, luckily—but he's simply stopped applying himself to his schoolwork and he's teetering on the edge of C-minus grades, which certainly doesn't make him top level college material, does it? I personally have always abominated the public schools here—they're in the cookie cutter business—and I've gone blue in the face trying to persuade his father to let me place him in a good solid private school in or near Cameron, but Mr. Dwiggins has just kept insisting that public schools were good enough for him and therefore they're automatically good enough for Barry, so what does one do?" She chattered and she chattered, a concerned mother but, as she chattered more, obviously a piranha. Fran's heart went out to the overrun boy.

For nearly a year, twice each week, Barry had remained something of a jigsaw, an intelligent and often appealing boy with a complex network of defenses, not a truly disturbed boy, but aimless and desperate for direction. After the first rocky, trying months of sparring, some of the defenses had cracked enough for flashes of real communi-

cation. When he was fourteen and on a vacation in Germany with his parents, he'd had a whore on the Reeperbahn, but he'd had a flock of homosexual experiences as well ("dates" he lugubriously called them), although he was pretty sure he'd wind up preferring, uh, girls. He, uh, still masturbated a lot. ('What's a lot?" "Every morning when I get up, even when I don't feel like it. And sometimes nights, too. That's too much, isn't it? I'm trying to quit.') When he was a kid, he'd sometimes gone into Woolworth's with as much as twenty-five dollars in his pocket and stolen things—comic books, lipsticks, cheap socks, nothing he wanted or needed—but he got over that when a lady clerk caught him lifting some Helene Curtis hair spray and threatened to call the manager. He'd sniffed cocaine once and skin popped heroin once, but only because the freaks he was freaking with invited him on. But drugs were not his bag, no way, he'd insisted: his way was pot and, now and then, a little hash. He thought he would like to be an actor or a photographer or both. He couldn't decide what he wanted to do, but he was sure he didn't want to go in with his father and sell insurance.

He was obviously uneasy on their first meeting after the arrest. "If I talk things out," he said, "can you keep it out of your records?"

"I have to keep records, Barry. That's the rule at this agency."

"Then I might as well be talking to the law. Can't they—what's the word—impound records?"

"Only with a fight. It's not likely."

He lit a cigarette with his gold lighter. "I don't have a habit. I'm not into anything. That's the important thing up front and that's the straight truth," he said.

Fran nodded.

"I got in with this guy Chet Olds at school. It was sort of a kick at first—he comes from nothing, from Brewster Street, and he was taking woodwork and shop and that stuff at school before he dropped out and he had this side job at a garage. He hung with the Brewster Street type—you know, punks, they never read a book, their idea of a big evening is to jump a car for a Saturday night joyride, and knocking colored kids around, that kind of thing. Don't ask me why he and I got tight. We didn't have anything in common. I guess what I dug about him was . . . well, I guess when we were hanging out together I felt tough—you know, 'Up yours, Jack,' like him."

"You never mentioned him to me before."

"No. No reason. There wasn't that big a deal about Chet to mention him; he was just this guy I knew. Anyway, he wears these sharp clothes. I knew he wasn't buying them from grease monkey pay, so I asked him and he said he was dealing, and he laid it on me that I could earn some good money if I did some dealing, too. Well, I said to count me out. And then I thought about it, and it came on like it might be a groove—not for the money; I get all of that I need at home—but, well, you know, for the kick."

"Was it all school trade?"

"Not all. Most. We were dealing for some grownups here in Cameron. I'm not going to talk about that."

"All right. How long did you deal before you were busted?"

". . . Five, maybe six months. Not all the time, every day, like Olds—just when I wanted something to do, when I figured I had to break out of the grind at home for a little while."

Softly Fran said, "I think you can come up with a less silly explanation than that, Barry. You knew two things: you knew that what you were doing was against the law, and you knew that what you were doing, all rationalizations aside, was shabby and destructive—not only to others, but to you."

Barry took a deep drag of his cigarette. "You want a laugh? You want to know why I went in? I made people depend on me. Made them dependent on me. For the first time in my life, people looked for me, and they were hung up till I got there. Nobody ever really paid attention to me before. Here were people waiting for me."

"People like Dorothy Donlin?"

"That wasn't me. She was Chet's customer."

"She might have been yours."

"Okay, she could've. She wasn't. Nobody forced her, or anyone, to be anybody's customer. Anyway, it's a real bummer now because Olds took off. Maybe he'll be picked up, maybe he won't. He certainly won't come dancing back on his own, not Olds. I have this lawyer—my father keeps telling me how much he's paying him; it's plenty—and this lawyer keeps telling me if I don't blow the whole whistle on our supplier, Brown, and name our customers, I'm in for a really hairy rap."

"So you do have a choice. You *can* blow the whistle."

He nibbled at his upper lip, stabbed out his cigarette and lit a fresh one and slowly shook his head. "It isn't that easy.

If I name one name, things are sure to get out of hand and I'll have to name them all, and I can't."

"You're protecting someone. One person?"

"Maybe. Yeah. I can't talk about it." Suddenly he stood. "I'm going now, Mrs. Townes. I don't feel like talking any more."

Alone, Fran stood at her office window, watched the patterns of rain drizzles, and thought wistfully, Poor Barry Duggins. Poor Barry, and poor Chester Olds and poor Dorothy Jean Donlin, and poor everyone in such a frantic hurry to hurt themselves. Where does it stop?

And where do we start, we professional swamis, we arrogant psyche-knitters who treat a generation's disease by applying Mercurochrome and Band Aid on a couple of superficial wounds?

She spoke Barry's session into the dictaphone. Frieda would type it up and the rest of the day's records in the morning—and took her coat and drove home without saying good night to her boss, Ben Hoff. Ben liked her and liked her work, and his tantrum after *Manhattan Digest*—justified, she eventually admitted to herself—hadn't lasted long, but he was still a bit chilly toward her. The ugly *Sun-Sentinel* had run a righteous, ugly interview (she saw Cyrus Kingsley's fine Cameron hand at the tiller) with Cameron's Superintendent of Schools, Ira Cox, in which Cox had attacked Fran's television charge that Cameron's schools were infested with drugs: "This unwarranted and totally insupportable accusation reflects insultingly on my thirty nine-year stewardship with our public school system," Mr. Cox complained. "I can assure any misinformed social worker, that I would not, nor will I, tolerate a narcotic traffic in our institution. Our students are fine, upstanding young people and the citizens of tomorrow, and my administration of our schools has never been questioned."

In Ben's favor, he had roared at the ganging-up interview, and was still pressing the *Sun-Sentinel* to interview Fran, as well, to let her refute the claim that she had said the schools were "infested" with drugs, or that she had singled out Ira Cox as a kind of nearsighted traffic cop. Kingsley, the publisher, was out of town. Leonard Bates, the paper's mealy editor, said maybe they could arrange an interview, and clearly meant no.

The Ira Coxes were terrified of focusing community action on the situation, but Fran supposed she hadn't the right to pass judgment. Focusing might cause a panic reaction that,

in their frightened opinion, could make matters worse. Admitting there was a problem would be bad because they had no idea of how to deal with it constructively. Most terrifying to Ira Cox, probably, was the prospect of forcible retirement. He was not a horrid man, merely an old one, a weary cob kept at his post sentimentally long past his years of effectiveness, satisfied that his kind of administration which had sufficed thirty years ago still sufficed in the 1970's.

No individual was to be blamed for looking the other way. Yet what continued to nag at Fran was that Cameron was saying, *It's not a fortune, my home yet, so what's the problem?*

4

Because the summer heat arrived before summer that year, the Cameron Country Club opened its swimming pool to its members on the first of June, a little earlier than usual. Forbes rarely found time to make use of any of the club's facilities, but he was especially glad he had rejoined, for it was a place Nancy could take her friends. He had half promised her a vacation away from Cameron this summer, and then suddenly summer was on its way and he had been too busy to make adequate plans for a trip. The club would have to do. Nancy didn't mind, or said she didn't.

What did disturb Nancy, Forbes found, was the fact that he was seeing Fran Townes. At the beginning, Nancy had seemed happy that he was getting out. "You need a life of your own. You should've been going out long before this."

But they had argued one early Thursday, and Nancy said, in a carefully off-hand tone, "I heard you come in at two o'clock. Boy, I wonder if Mrs. Townes looks as sleepy as you do this morning."

"Okay Sherlock," he said uneasily, "what's with running a check on me?"

"Oh, come on, Daddy," she said. "But really, how well will you function at the office on five hours' sleep?"

He grinned, not at all amused. "Okay, out with it, warden. What's really on your mind?"

"Just your health."

"My health is great." There was no reason to add details, but he added, "Mrs. Townes and I had a late dinner, and we sat around and talked, and before we knew it it was after one. That happens."

Nancy looked at him. "Daddy, are you thinking of getting married again?"

Forbes' eyebrows lifted slightly. "No. When and if I do think about it, I'll let you know before I let the lucky lady know—*any* lucky lady."

"I just hope it isn't Fran Townes."

He frowned. "Suppose you explain that."

"She's divorced, which means she couldn't have been very stable to begin with. My impression of her is that she's very neurotic. I wouldn't want her for a stepmother. I wouldn't want that creepy son of hers for a God'—a brother! Don't you understand? She's looking for a husband with money."

"That's enough!"

"You asked me to explain what I feel."

"You've explained nothing. You're scattering a lot of juvenile buckshot that you ought to be ashamed of. I suggest you live a little longer and learn a lot more before you set yourself up as the judge of other people's characters and motives."

On the railroad station's crowded platform, waiting for the 8:04 to New York, Forbes spotted Vic Devlin, looking sallow and hung over, and walked in the opposite direction in order to avoid him. On the train, he hid behind the *Wall Street Journal* and wished he hadn't been so damned sharp and sarcastic with the child. He had been alone with Fran only six or seven times. He hadn't even gone to bed with her. He was certainly in no mad rush to marry. But how could Nancy know that? Of course she had fantasies of being displaced. Of course her loss of Louise still hurt. Of course he had to be as sensitive as humanly possible, to tread as lightly and gently as superhumanly possible.

But when he returned home that evening, and Nancy still acted sullen and uncommunicative, he suddenly decided he had rights, too. He phoned Fran and invited her and Mike to the club on Saturday afternoon. Mike worked Saturdays at The Shoe Box, Fran explained, but she agreed to meet him if he would agree to let her cook him a steak on Saturday evening. "If it's medium rare," he said.

On Saturday morning, Nancy curtly announced that there was a dance that night at her school and that she was going with Ritchie Atkins. "Atkins . . ." Forbes repeated. "That's a new one to me. Is he Russ Atkins' boy?"

"I don't know his father's name."

"I thought Flip Byron was your number one beau."

"That was umpteen beaux ago," she said and started out of the house, but Forbes called to her.

"Where are you going now?" he asked. "It's awfully early."

"To meet Ritchie and some others in front of City Hall. We have peace petitions and we're trying to get as many signatures as we can. Then most of us will go to the club this afternoon."

"How are you getting to City Hall? I'll drive you."

"I'll walk. It's a nice day."

Forbes went to her. "Tell me what all this is all about, princess."

"What *what's* all about?"

"Your all-of-a-sudden deep freeze personality. How long do you plan to keep it up?"

"I'm sorry you find me so obnoxious," she said haughtily and opened the door and fled across the lawn. Forbes followed her as far as the lip of the porch and loudly, angrily, ordered her to come back. She disappeared around the corner. Bill Paxton, who lived across the street, was running a power motor over his yard and looked up.

Marcia was stacking silverware in the dishwasher. Forbes poured coffee and asked, "What the hell's with that kid? How did Jekyll turn into Hyde overnight?"

"Why? What happened?"

"Nothing."

The afternoon was bright, in spite of clouds that interrupted the sky's even blue and made moving shadows on the hills behind the country club. Forbes, in swim trunks, and Fran Townes, in a one piece pale green swim suit that was modest yet displayed a striking figure, were served turkey sandwiches at poolside while they watched Nancy and a small gang of boys and girls, mostly boys and attentive ones, splash and bob and race in the water. Forbes was quietly incensed by Nancy's behavior. she had greeted Fran, but only after Forbes had twice beckoned to her; she had been cool and stiffly formal, and had dashed away the moment hellos were said.

"I'm sorry, Fran," Forbes had said. "That's not like her, and I'm embarrassed."

"It doesn't have to be a lasting thing. There's nothing so mercurial as a girl-woman of sixteen."

Forbes worked to ignore Nancy's aloofness and enjoyed the lazy day, enjoyed Fran as they dozed together under the pleasing sun, and later as they swam. He had listened

in fascination to her story of the sawdy, defensive retreat to that New York tearoom. Emerging together from the pool, they almost collided with Cyril Kingsley, the *Sentinel* publisher and board member and Chamber of Commerce tub thumper, who stopped and genially clapped Forbes' hand. "Out loafing, are we, Charlie?" he remarked.

"Good to see you, Cyril. Mr. Kingsley, may I introduce Mrs. Townes?"

Kingsley's rheumy eyes squinted. "Mrs. Townes?"

"Yes, Mr. Kingsley," Fran said coolly. "From Cameron Community Service."

"I see," he said. "How do you do?" He squinted at Forbes and shook hands.

"You've missed your calling, Kingsley," said Forbes. "Someone should've told Cyril Connor Cameron was sure that it meant more to him than the Nobel Prize and the Legion of Merit combined. You don't call it that, but her baby has been on your mind." Cyril Kingsley knew something about Cameron.

"But I was naughty."

"You were. And you'll have to pay the penalty."

At about four o'clock, Nancy and her cohorts were dressed and were starting down the broad stairs that led to the parking lot. "Be right back," Forbes told Fran, and he walked toward Nancy until he caught her eye and sternly summoned her with his hand. She came. "I don't approve of today's behavior, young lady," he said, quietly but visibly angry.

"What behavior?"

"[illegible] you've been very [illegible] and responsible, and I expect it."

"I have to go. The kids are waiting."

"All right, go. But I want you at the house before your curfew tonight or I'll let you stew for it. And I want to hear what you're trying to prove."

Nancy ran.

He decided, for the time being, against confiding in Fran, who left the club not long after because, she explained, she had a mountain of paperwork at home to catch up on. Forbes saw her to her Rambler, where she turned, gazed at him fully and affectionately, and said, "Thank you for today, Charlie. If you feel like talking about Nancy later, I'd be happy to listen and I'll be more-or-less. I just [illegible]

When she drove off, he drifted to the club's bar and ordered a Scotch and water. The drink bored him, and the golfers and golfers' gabby wives irritated him, so he paid his tab and changed his clothes and went home to Rutledge Road.

Nancy swept into the house at six, babbling that she had to hurry to shower and dress because Ritchie was coming for her at seven. "Why so early?" Forbes demanded.

"The dance is at eight thirty and Ritchie's taking me to dinner at Navarro's first," she called over her shoulder as she raced upstairs. At half past six, Forbes mounted the stairs, knocked at her closed door, and directed, "We have some talking to do."

"Not *now*, Daddy! I broke a strap on the dress I *have* to wear tonight, and I'm still not dressed and I'm trying to sew it fast without making a mess of it."

"Can't Marcia do that? You and I can—"

"No, I've got to do it. I won't be long, honestly." Her tone wasn't nasty, which was something.

At twenty minutes to seven, the front doorbell sounded, and Marcia admitted a bearded beanpole who introduced himself as Richard Atkins. He and Forbes shook hands, and Forbes, frustrated and annoyed and not in the least trusting, ushered him into the living room, where they sat and where the boy cleared his throat a lot. The beard was a preposterous conceit, Forbes thought, and he was inexplicably offended by it, but the boy wore good clothes and his manners were good. Clearly ill at ease (as the teenage Charlie Forbes had been ill at ease in all the parlors with all the girls' fathers he had met for the first time), the boy survived the surely intolerable minutes of waiting by delivering an earnest speech against war and fascism.

He was a nice kid, Forbes decided, and was further impressed to learn that he indeed was Russ Atkins' son. "I'm very fond of your Dad," Forbes said. "We've served on a few committees together here in Cameron, and he's a real powerhouse."

"Powerhouse? *My* father?" The boy seemed startled.

Nancy appeared at seven on the dot, her carriage impeccable, the whole of her utterly flawless. The men stood at once, and Forbes' heart lurched with pride and with love. In the minute before it was time to go, she was civil, was poised, she was ladylike, she was charming, and Forbes,

to have a great evening. Nancy kissed his cheek and smiled.

He watched them walk to the driveway and Marcia said, "I thought you were planning to give her the dressing down of her life."

"Wouldn't've been necessary," he said, still warmed and happy. "There goes a young lady, Marcia, who's never going to get lost. She's quiet, all the way down the line, always has been. I just forget that sometimes."

"She certainly can wrap you around her pinkie, just like Louise could."

"Baloney," he said, and chuckled.

On West Street, Charles stopped at Means' Florist for an arrangement of daffodils and gladiolas and a few ferns next door for a bottle of good Bordeaux. Driving toward Ballinder, he reflected on the relationship that hadn't yet quite taken shape with Fran Lowell. There were reasons he had given himself why he had seen most of the women in her apartment but not her bedroom. One was that her housekeeper or her son Mike was always somewhere about or would show up soon. Another reason, he recognized, was Fairfield County had a very poor supply of motels.

The real reason, he thought, was that the more he had come to regard her as someone increasingly meaningful to him, the more he had become convinced that she would view sex between them as his announcement of a serious future.

I want it serious, he told himself.

No, I don't.

Fran's front door was open when he reached the garden apartment, and he found her in the kitchen, looking an enormous salad. She looked up when she saw him. She was wearing a simple yellow dress, and her dark blond hair, full and curly, framed her face in a way that softened her small, pretty nose. "That's a lot of fix a salad," he said.

"You don't want it to sound as if you're trying to beat the clock. Gently, lady, gently. Lettuce and celery have feelings, too."

"Oh, take the ice out of the trays and mind your own business," she gaily scolded back. "I've been bruising lettuce and celery all my life for kings and princes and I get constant raves. What *beautiful* flowers, Charles! Thank you so much."

She unwrapped the pink tissue from around the flowers and found the wine on its side in the refrigerator door and went for an ice tray. "Where are our chaperones?" she asked.

"Mrs. Curtis went to the city to visit with her sister. And Mike's out on a heavy date."

"Then we're all alone for the evening."

"Yes. Isn't it seductive?" Fran said unseductively.

They started for the garden with the gin and tonics he built, but they didn't get there. Forbes took and held her arm. She turned and looked up, still in beaming good humor for a moment until she saw and clearly connected with the message she read on his face. "Well, now . . ." she said softly.

The drinks were set down.

They were at the side of her bed scarcely minutes later, not talking, kissing clumsily and sweetly and hard. She seemed uncertain, as though she wasn't sure it was right to be this ready this fast. But then she was ready quickly, and she breathed, "Ah, yes . . . O God yes, Charlie . . ." and he caught a glimpse of her glistening face, contorted by pleasure heightened to the edge of torture, and everything was incredibly right.

Nearly as perfect as the act itself, Forbes thought many minutes later as he lay on his back, contented, pleased, was that her good humor had bounced back immediately—not wise-guy humor that rejected the beauty of the act, but gentle lightness that banished tomorrow and all the tomorrows. Her weight rested on an elbow, one breast touching his forearm, and she was smiling. "Why couldn't you have had the decency to warn me in advance that you're so dull in the hay?" she kidded, happiness smouldering brightly from her eyes.

"Did you ever read *All Passion Spent?* I read it in college, and I couldn't understand that title. That was in college . . ."

She laughed. "Just my luck. The first lover I've had in ever so long that I have something of a case on turns out to be a quitter."

"Critics, yet," he said, and laughed with her, and sat up and kissed her.

He got home at shortly before one. Marcia had just switched off a Johnny Carson repeat, and remarked without concern that Nancy wasn't in yet. "You go to sleep," he said. "I'll stay up."

Forbes read in the living room until one-thirty, and Nancy was still not back. The dances at Miss Barnaby's always ended by twelve-thirty, and Nancy was always at home by one.

At two, he found Russ Atkins' number in the directory, and placed the call, unable to think of anyone else to phone.

Russ' voice was heavy with sleep, but he didn't sound especially bothered. "Take it easy, Charlie," he counseled. "Richie's a careful first-rate driver. They probably stopped for a hamburger with the other kids."

At a quarter past two, the phone rang. She only person he knew connected with Mrs. Evans's, Sarah Evans, the school's headmistress, would have been a friend of Louise's. The caretaker, or the cook, or perhaps one of the gardeners, while of a job getting a message to Mrs. Evans that he wasn't allowed to give anyone her private number.

"This is an emergency," Forbes replied, close to the mouthpiece that gave his name and number. "Get her right away and tell her to call me immediately."

The phone rang forty-five agonizing minutes later. Sarah Evans was on the line, and he declared, "I apologize for disturbing you, but Nancy's not home yet. I'm wondering if you were at the dance tonight, whether you have any idea of where she and her friends might have gone after the dance."

"That is rather peculiar," Sarah Evans replied. "I was at the dance tonight from start to finish, as I always am, and I always notice Nancy and spend at least a word or two with her. Nancy," she paused briefly, "is a special favorite here, you know. But she wasn't at the dance tonight. I remember I looked for her, and even asked some of her friends if they knew why she hadn't come. No one had seen her, and no one seemed to know why. I do hope nothing's wrong . . ."

5

Six endless afternoons after he saw her at her swimming pool, Lip unloaded cartons of milk at his father's market and relived every breath of that Wednesday.

He had seen her from about forty feet away.

Monica Spencer.

Younger than he'd been in the old movie on television.

Naked.

He had been stopped in his tracks for a moment, frozen, awed, as she raised her arms over her head, as she and a blue of flesh sailed into the water. So that she wouldn't see him seeing her when her head emerged, he'd forced himself to break the spell and rush the cardboard box to the rear patio. "Byron's!" he called through the screen door.

The housekeeper he had delivered to over the past couple of weeks let him in, and he placed the box where she told him to, and she made him wait as she'd done before while she checked to be sure he had brought the essential items.

When he returned outside, Monica Spencer was out of the pool and at the patio table, wearing a beach robe and tying its sash.

Think of something to say to her, you bucketbrain, he told himself as she removed her bathing cap and lit a cigarette. You'll never have a chance like this again.

"How are you today, Miss Spencer?" he said, not standing really still because she might get the idea he was trying to get tight, a punk kid looking to be familiar.

She was just about to sit. Her smile was cordial and blinding, and for a moment she didn't answer. Then: "Sympathetic. I saw that eight-ton box you took into the house."

"You saw me?"

"Mm, just a glimpse, from the water. The box looked mammoth, yet you were holding it with such ease."

"Ah, that wasn't heavy. I'm used to it. It's all a matter of knowing which muscles to use when you lift."

"Oh, is *that* the secret? Every time I lift an eight-ton box, I ache for hours. What's your name?"

"Fred Byron. They call me Flip."

"Hello, Flip. Do you come here every day?"

"Just twice a week. Wednesdays and Saturdays, usually."

"Wednesdays and Saturdays, matinee days. Do you enjoy your work?"

"Driving a grocery truck? Well, I wouldn't call it something I'd want to make a lifetime career out of." *Now*, he thought, what's there to lose? "I'm planning on being a writer, once school's over and I get out of Cameron."

"Truly? How fascinating! What will you write? Or what do you write?"

"Plays, mostly. There's one I'm working on now. I realize I have a lot to learn."

"So have all of us." Wildly, he hoped against hope she would offer to read *The Shell* or, better yet, have him read it to her some day. She didn't. She was still smiling, but she dismissed him with, "I suppose you'd best be getting back. Very, very good luck to you, Flip."

"Thanks a lot, Miss Spencer. It's been great meeting you. Uh—maybe I'll see you again some time."

"Yes. I hope so." He was just about to step into the panel truck when he heard, "Flip?" He walked back to her.

"Tell me what would happen if I suddenly discovered on a non-Wednesday or non-Saturday that I need something from your store, and my driver isn't around to go for it? I don't drive, nor does Mrs. Carmody, the housekeeper. Would you be able to come to my rescue?"

"Well, let's see. For the next few weeks, till I'm finished with school, I won't be getting to the store till a little after three. But any time after three, and any time on Saturdays, sure. I'll be glad to."

"That's sweet, Flip, and I'm grateful. I'll break my neck trying not to be a nuisance."

The following day, Thursday, Flip cut his two afternoon classes and was at the store before one o'clock, on the off-but-just-possible chance that she would phone ahead of time. The old man was surprised to see him. "I left school early," Flip explained. "I figured it's time to hose down the platform out in back. Nobody's been getting to it."

The old man chuckled, but didn't pursue it.

No call came that day, nor the next. On Saturday morning, March 13, the other hundred Flip seven phoned-in orders totaling over $400 from Fort Bonk Road. He drove there early in the afternoon, when he imagined she would be awake. "Burton's!" he called through the screen door. The housekeeper let him in. He fought to summon the nerve to ask about, ask for, Miss Spencer, but couldn't.

Now it was the next Tuesday afternoon, at a little before four, and Clarence was bellowing at him, "Hey, Flip, telephone for you! On the line!" He put down a case of milk cartons and went to the wall phone near the markets rear door, pressed the 2 button and said, "Hello."

"Flip? Good afternoon. This is Miss Lasbrink."

Her voice. Her deep delicious voice.

He tensed. "Hello." Clarence and the butcher were having an argument near him, making too much noise. "Wait a second," he said, placed his hand over the receiver, cried, "You guys, take it down a minute, okay?" and they looked at him and did. He braced himself. "Hello. There's this racket going on here."

"What did I interrupt?"

"Nothing."

"Would you be free to bring me a small delivery? Now?"

"Yes. Sure."

"Will your boss let you out?"

"Sure, that's no sweat. Uh, that wouldn't be any problem."

"Good. I seem to be desperately out of canned pears. You must have grosses of them there."

"Well, yes, there's plenty. Ah, how many cans?"

"I don't know. Two. Two sounds like a nice number."

"Heavy syrup or sugar-free?"

"Oh, heavy syrup. The heavier the better. How long will it take you?"

He read the wall clock. "Twenty minutes, maybe."

He heard a small click. She'd hung up.

Replacing the receiver, thinking quickly, a little frightened, he considered taking the panel truck, which would make his absence look like an official one, and decided against it; he might not get back right away and he would have the truck tied up. He hurried to the canned fruits and vegetables aisle, hoping the old man wouldn't see him, two large cans of S & W pears and then one for good measure, and hurried back to the rear, grabbing a paper bag on the way. He told Clarence, "I'm not sure when I'll be back. If my father asks for me, say I forgot I had a dentist appointment."

He sped to her in his Chevvy. Suddenly he realized how he was dressed. T-shirt, old slacks and sneaks; he hadn't thought to change back into his decent slacks and sports shirt. He had showered that morning, but he could use a fresh one now. Oh, the hell with it, he thought. I act like I'm expecting to get laid.

Yeah.

What else has been on my mind this whole past week? Crazy, of course . . . What would a lady like that want to shack up with me for?

But yeah. It hasn't left my mind all week.

Her garage door was up. Her car was gone, and he wondered if some shitheel hoax had been played on him. He had to knock at the kitchen door three different times before she, not the housekeeper, opened it.

She wasn't smiling. "You're late," she said.

"Late? I just hung up the phone."

She stood aside to let him in, and closed the door with a cell guard's finality. She was wearing a short, nubby, bright orange robe that was buttoned at the neck, sashed loosely at the waist, and stopped only inches below where her thighs met. Her black hair was long and made her look very young. There wasn't much makeup on that wonderful face; there didn't have to be. "You can put the peaches down there, anywhere."

"You said you wanted pears . . ."

"Whatever. Put your bag down and come with me and we'll see if we can find any poor money here in Manlaby."

Flip followed her. She owned the greatest, smoothest, straightest legs in the world. She had to be in her forties, yet she couldn't be that old. Late twenties, maybe. A forty-year-old lady in her late twenties. That didn't make any sense. But why did it have to? he thought. He followed her through the kitchen and a corridor to a large, dark room or enclosed porch that had a screen for each wooden frame around it. There was a bare chair and bench, a bureau on wheels. There were books and papers everywhere, and the closed inside was noisy pipes and fans somewhere. On the lounge chair's footrest were some red-and-white-colored garments in a bulk that might be a bathing suit. She pressed them up and asked, "Are you in a frenzy or shy about your job?"

"No, not too. I'm at the dentist's now."

She smiled at that. "Help yourself anywhere you like to drink while you're having your teeth drilled. I shall return, instanter."

He watched her go, and set his drip pants down over his bags, feeling like a rube and a messy one, at that. The smell of sweet, rich, pungent perfume lingered, and his gold-iron loins were suddenly aware of a golden touch time. He shuddered, not quite pacing, settled in the single straight-back chair and then started again to walk. Not that she'd called him back to bed, nor because he could snap at flies and get movie stars to do that, yet what else would he tell Lon Tate, and he was sure that he would not see her again, and he shuddered that he would get back and explore with a second stroke. He strove to think about something else, anything else. He saw a play script, paged to page 18. The page contained dialogue between a Bluejay and a Judith. All the Judiths were circled in red pencil and he read:

Bluejay (angry): "You love me. Say it."
Judith: "I'll say it one day. I'm waiting."
Bluejay: "For what? For gypsy violins in the background?"
Judith (crosses to vanity): "For rain to fall on the roof.
For rain to fall on red clay."

He saw a stack of unopened letters. He saw a sheet of paper on a brown clipboard and three pens. The paper was filled with doodles, phallic ones. More than half of them

had pen lines and scribbled ovals through and over them, as if to reject the doodles.

Miss Spencer came back, wearing the red and white garments she had taken, a two piece swim suit, after all, the strapless halter cut low enough to show the deep valley between rounded breasts that were large but not old lady-large the snug pants somewhere between bikini and normal length. Flip instinctively turned sideways because his goddamn loins were at it again and she carried the robe over her arm and mock-complained, "Hey, you've been on my premises for all of four minutes and you're not drinking. What are you, some kind of pervert?"

"I've—just been sort of looking around."

"See anything of interest?" she asked, turning to take a glass of whiskey from her bar.

You, Flip wanted to say.

"You," he said, ready to die.

She turned again, the glass in her hand and a different kind of smile he couldn't immediately interpret told him he at least hadn't made her mad. "What a lovely thing to say!" she declared, and he saw a fleeting flush across her radiant face. "That does call for a drink. Will you please *pour* yourself something—there's beer and there's root beer if you insist on being neurotic about it—or do I have to do *everything* for you?" She paused as she passed him, and stood very close, and rested one hand on his forearm, and squeezed the taut flesh between her thumb and forefinger. "The interest, not so incidentally is mutual," she acknowledged. "You, my friend, are an absolutely, unspeakably gorgeous physical specimen. I'm sure you develop a body like this only from pure living and pure thoughts."

He forced himself to grin. "Well, fairly pure living," he said, and went to the little bar and retrieved a 7-Up

"And the thoughts? Always and forever white as snow, yes?"

Man. "Not always."

"How depraved. How delightfully depraved."

Sit down, he thought, or she'll see. You might as well be carrying a poster.

He uncapped the 7 Up bottle. She was on the lounge chair, her ankles crossed, and she was holding an unlighted cigarette. "Will you tell me about your play?" she asked. "Or isn't that fair?"

"Well, it's fair, but I doubt if I could do it in a couple of sentences. It's sort of—"

"I hope it stings and burns and spits out truth, Flip. People send me play scripts, and they're garbage because all they have to say is that it's raining outside. Would you bring me my lighter? It's there on the bar somewhere."

Finding it, he took it to her and sat at the foot of her chair, because otherwise she would really see his shame. She sat forward, and he flicked the lighter and brought it to her cigarette, and silently cursed the unsteadiness of his hand. The slight shaking wasn't lost on her, damn it. She held his wrist, caught the flame, inhaled and blew out a billow of smoke, and, loosening her grip on his wrist but not quite freeing it, she smiled again. "You ought to do something about your frightful nervous condition," she said.

Quit the timids, he warned himself. Act sophisticated. "What do you suggest?"

"Oh, dear. Let's see. You might kiss me—if the thought isn't a repulsive one."

"Repulsive? To kiss *you*?"

"A question with a question. Why don't you kiss me while you're thinking of an answer? By the way, dear, I'm not one of those let's-not-spoil-it girls. Nor will I bite you—unless there's a biting agreement in advance, of course."

"Are we . . . well, is anyone around? Will somebody come in?"

"Only you, darling, but let's not rush things. The primary project at hand is to cure you of your frightful nervous condition."

The cleft between her ripe breasts was sharp, and Flip felt a pleasurable panic as they pressed against him. She didn't just let herself be kissed. She helped.

6

Since Dorothy Jean Donlin's awful death, Jill Buckston, fourteen years old, had stuck to the story she had given police and her parents, that she was only Dorothy Jean's sometime school friend, that she knew absolutely nothing about drugs at Cameron High or anywhere; and that she, along with all the other kids, had had no idea Dorothy Jean was into anything.

Suddenly, Jill had to talk to someone. Not to her mother, who was a fashion designer in New York and seldom around. Her father, a pediatrician here in Cameron, was seldom

available for confidences, either, but she trusted him a little more than her mother, a tense woman preoccupied with her career.

"I was with Dorothy Jean in study hall on the day she—died," Jill said. "This boy came up and sat right behind us. It all happened so fast, like they were doing something they weren't supposed to do but like they knew what they were doing. This boy gave Dorothy Jean a small paper bag and she gave him a small envelope that was folded up. I asked her what all that was about, and she told me this boy was her dealer and she bought scag from him."

"Scag? Dope?" Jill's father asked.

"Heroin. I didn't know what scag was, either. I had to ask her and she told me. And she showed it to me, too, in an envelope in that paper bag. It was a white powder. I was never so shook up in my whole life. The last person in the world I'd ever even suspect would take anything like that was Dottie Donlin, she was so . . . shy and sort of out of everything except schoolwork, like. She saw I was really knocked out. She invited me to try some of it with her sometime. I told her she was looking for just miserable problems, but she said she wasn't hooked on it, and she made me promise I'd keep her secret."

"My God, baby, why did you wait till now with all this?"

"I didn't want any trouble. I thought if I said something to the police, or anyone, I'd get involved. Maybe they'd think I was fooling around with dope. I—I don't know . . . if I told the police, I'd have to tell them who the boy was—Barry Dwiggins—and I was afraid he'd do something to me, or get someone to hurt me, or something. But I had to tell somebody."

"You're sure it was Barry Dwiggins."

She nodded. "Will I have to testify or something? I don't want to get involved. I'm scared, but I couldn't hold it in any longer. That's why the other kids at school keep quiet—they see dope being passed all over the place, but they don't say anything because they're afraid they'll get involved. Maybe they keep quiet because they don't think there's anything wrong with it."

Dr. Mitchell Buckston spoke to his wife, Muriel, when she came home from the city.

"Of course she'll be involved if she utters a sound," Muriel reasoned, stirring her Martini with a Grenadille swizzle stick. "That's how the law operates: To get what they're after, they'd nail any innocent passerby to the cross."

"Jill may be the only one who could help convict the Dwiggins kid," said Backston. "If he *is* peddling this poison—he was arrested with some other kid and a drug supplier, but no one's tied him in specifically yet with the Donlin girl—if he *is* the one. He should be put away."

"What do I care about the Dwiggins kid, or any other kid? My own child comes first and foremost. I *will* not have Jill fed through that sausage grinder. Yes, you're right, she should've told the police what she saw the day they questioned her. But he didn't, because obviously she was petrified. And she won't, now or ever, Mitch. She's ours, and she's sensitive, and whatever she saw or thought she saw is to go no farther than this house. If we don't protect our own child, what kind of unfeeling parents are we?"

After several days of recurring concern, Mitchell Backston considered contacting Noel Ingram, who had been assigned to the prosecution, even considered contacting the boy's father, Warren Dwiggins. Finally he telephoned Vic Donlin, who lived three blocks away from the Backstons but whom he had never met, and asked if he might drop by rather than speak his piece on the phone.

"Yes," Donlin said, and hung up.

Mrs. Donlin was not at home when he arrived, which might or might not be all to the good, he thought. He repeated what he had learned, and said, "I am telling you this with no great pleasure, Mr. Donlin."

"I understand," Donlin said.

"I'd very much appreciate something from you. As the case goes to trial, if there's any sign that Dwiggins might go free because of insufficient evidence, or *any* unjustified reason, I promise I'll produce my daughter to testify. But if he can be found guilty without her, I'd prefer that she be completely out of it. She's a rather high-strung child, and we're all interested in protecting our own from the four winds, aren't we?"

Donlin nodded.

"Can we shake on that?"

They shook.

"I hope I've done the right thing. Our primary consideration is that our little girl be spared the emotional scars she'd take away with her from a court appearance, even a short one. At the same time, we'd never forgive ourselves if a guilty party went free because we didn't speak up."

Donlin nodded again.

Mitchell Backston left. Victor Donlin picked up his phone

and called Neal Trewitt, Cameron Chief of Detectives. Trewitt returned the call within an hour and thanked him for the information. Then Donlin took a drive in the night air. He drove slowly past the Dwiggins house, out on Overridge. Lights were on and there were five cars parked in the driveway. A party, maybe. Toasting the boy's upcoming acquittal and a deluxe vacation to help him get over his bad time with the ruffian law, maybe.

Still slowly, Donlin drove away.

7

Tom Lark sang and played *Love Is All That Counts* on his guitar as a beefy music publisher named Murray Coles pared his fingernails, and Coles said flatly that he didn't like it. Tom sang and played his best number, *Mountain Man*, and Coles scratched his nose and said, "No deal here, fella. I'll be wasting both our time if I don't lay it out for you. Your stuff doesn't stink, exactly, but I've heard it a million times before, and better, and so has the market. Matter of fact, your guitar playing isn't any better than second or third rate, either."

There was a sharp pointed letter opener on the scarred desk, and Tom's instinct ordered him to run it into the scum sonofabitch, but he didn't because getting from the twenty-seventh floor down to the lobby and outside mightn't be so easy, especially with the receptionist on the other side of the door. He stood, and even grinned, and declared with dignity, "That's why you're in a rathole office like this, man: you don't know what real talent is."

"Yeah, you're right. The door's behind you."

The first weeks in New York City were a bad scene. He'd learned to buy only a few things at a time with the credit card, and only twice was he asked for identification, but he wanted his own card, wanted to buy and come and go as he pleased with a money roll and an identity that were his. No one was ready to dig his great and truthful songs and the great and truthful way he played them. No one that mattered was listening at all, and he began to think of splitting lonehearted New York City, and he remembered there was no place, really, to split to. In his second bad week, watching his roll and his confidence diminish, a half-juiced but friendly cowboy he met and rapped with in the Sixth Avenue Auto-

mat on Forty-second Street hipped him to the escort business, where a cat could pick up some bread balling hungry old broads. The cowboy's name was Gurly, and he suggested that Tom mention his name to a guy named Steve who ran a porno store farther up on Sixth.

"Thanks, but that routes not for me, man," Tom said, and meant it, because all the antennae told him that was the road to absolutely nowhere.

Until he and the city connected, the two Connecticut chicks, Georgia and Shirley, helped to bring down Tom's pantes. They were low-class dummies but they dug him hard and jumped when he snapped, and he liked that, liked the control of them. They all had spent a long while in the cafeteria on that evening they'd met. He had been patient and kind and flattering, he had listened to them talk, and had talked with them and to them; they were backwoods sheep looking for a hip shepherd, and after the cafeteria he had taken them to his cramped, crummy hotel room—there was nowhere else to take them—and they sat on his bed, smoking one of the last joints of the good stuff he'd saved from the Midwest, and he sat on the chair and played and sang five of his numbers, teasingly and softly so the neighbors wouldn't go bitching about the noise.

The chicks sat rapt, and fell out. "This time next week, I'll have the biggest pad in town and the two of you'll be my special guests, in style," he said, and they agreed, and he sat between them and tenderly put his arms around them both and kissed one chick and then the other. Shirley was the more nervous of the two, and after the fourth kiss she gently raised his hand from her covered breast and inched away until she was off the bed and on the chair. Georgia with the corn colored hair wasn't acting like it was an everyday kick for her, either—she was tight and shaky, even with the lion's share of the grass in her—but her smile was brave and she took off her sweater and bra the second he told her to, and her smile got braver as Tom ate her perky little boobs with his eyes. He touched them lightly, respectfully, and said, "Warm and pretty. These are what my songs are about."

"I better . . . ah . . . cut out," Shirley said, worried and partly rising. "two's company uh . . . I can't get home too late, uh . . ."

Tom pitched her his best displeased frown and his most restrained yet ominous voice. "Yeah, why don't you do that, baby?" he baited. "Go home where it's safe and make

your Sunday School teacher proud of you. Don't live. Exist. Don't feel. Don't dig. Rap about excitement, but cut out when it shows up. You do that."

"Oh, shove that home too-late, Shirl," Georgia complained. "Come on over."

Shirley stayed. She watched Georgia obey Tom's soft-spoken never-harsh command to strip ("Slower," he directed. "With pride, love. That's a life you have, not two nips and a box. Be proud of it. Show it like you're proud") and to hang her slacks on the closet hook. Stonefaced, she watched Georgia return from the closet, watched Tom slowly, sweetly, masterfully caress and stroke the whimpering Georgia. She let Tom take her damp hand and gently bring her back to the bed, let him kiss her throat and her lips. "I don't roughhouse and I don't threaten," he said quietly, closely, his gaze direct and intense. "I go by the one Commandment that says it all: 'Thou shalt live while thou art alive, and love everyone, and hurt no one.' You hear, baby?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, as if in pain, and seconds passed, and she nodded, the eyes still shut.

He undressed her, and Georgia helped, and for the next hour Tom Lara taught them both how to be free, how to take and give and share, to accept and do everything he offered as natural and right because everything was natural and right. He allowed himself no release, but he successfully encouraged them to be generous and guiltless with theirs.

Before they left that first night—they would have to run to catch the last train to Cameron—and clearly in worship, Georgia wrote her telephone number and gave it to him. Shirley balked for a moment, as if she still didn't fathom what the hour had done for her, how it had changed her, but she didn't resist when Georgia reclaimed the piece of paper and wrote her number as well. Tom saw them out, waited, and then went to the end of the hall, where he showered their dirtiness off him.

After that night they came to his pad—together or separately, depending on how easily they could give their folks excuses—whenever he summoned. Georgia, he sensed the third time she appeared, would have set fire to the city if that were his wish. At his suggestion, she began to bring him a five or a ten from her daddy's cash register. In return, Tom treated her like the goddess she wasn't, persuading her and persuading her that she was special, very special in a world of human zeros. Shirley came as often as possible, too, but she was a more complicated sheep, with things to

be taught yet about the need for unquestioned loyalty and devotion to him. She wouldn't bring him money she claimed there was no way for her to get any—but little by little she seemed less and less distressed by his commanding tone.

One Sunday afternoon, Georgia came alone and broke into tears when he touched her. She showed him a fresh looking row of welts on her buttocks. "A present from my old man," she sobbed. "Nobody's told that lousy Polack that I'm not a kid any more and I got a right to breathe same's anybody else. There was ten dollars missin' from the till last night—here," she said and I gave him the ten, "—and that wop waitress he's bangin' says where I must've took it. He landed into me with his belt on *her* say-so. Man, I thought he was gonna kill me."

Tom comforted her and showed, felt, concern. "These are beauts," he marveled. "When's the last time someone used a belt on *him?*"

"Never. He's 210 pounds of solid rock. What'm I gonna do, punch him?"

"I'll punch him for you."

"No, not even you could do that. Aw, what's the difference? One of these days I'll just pick up and leave for good, and he can find himself somebody else to beat up on." She saw the anger in his eyes. "Let's forget it. Doesn't matter."

"No. Evil that isn't punished is what causes all the grief in this world. I'll punish your father for you, baby."

"Yeah. Okay. I hope you kill him."

"There's always that chance," Tom acknowledged, and tenderly brought her into his arms.

He had always hated and been depressed by the loneliness of saloons, but he was getting dangerously flatpocketed and so he sat one night at the counter of a loud saloon on Eighth Avenue. Mercifully, he didn't have to wait long. During his second Schlitz, he got friendly with a middle aged, mild little zero who called himself Cliff, who was dead sober one minute and a good two sheets to the wind the next, and who suggested they clear out of the stale cigarette air and take a walk. Cliff paid up from a fat roll of green, and they strolled out of the loud saloon and onto a dark side street, where the zero affectionately patted Tom's crotch. "Who goes first?" Cliff rasped.

"You, faggot," Tom said and drove his switchblade, swiftly and cleanly, again and again and again, into the throat and belly of the wide-eyed old grab he enjoyed

pretending was that big-time publisher, Murray Coles. He helped himself to the roll and the money clip and the wrist watch, but the wedding band that could have been gold wouldn't come off without tugging, so he left it and the old queer and walked back to his crummy hotel room.

And decided that night that he just might be pressing his luck. Where was the law that said the fuzz couldn't trace the queer to the Eighth Avenue saloon, and that some joker there couldn't come up with a groovy description of Tom? And this nickel-and-dime mugging was jerk's work, anyway: the fat roll added up to a whole nineteen dollars, one five and the rest singles, and the watch was a cheapie Timex.

The very next day, pride temporarily swallowed, he went to the porno shop on Sixth Avenue that Girly had mentioned. Two men were leafing through magazines and books, but neither of them looked to be a clerk, so Tom deduced that the man on the phone behind the cash register was Steve, Girly's contact.

Waiting for him to clear off the phone, Tom ambled to the rear of the store and thumbed idly through the magazines. They turned him off. If slobbering over pictures of bumpers and groins and buns and twisted faces faking constant come was now the creepies got their tumbles hot, that was their hangup and not his concern, but he disapproved of the crummy magazines. The faggot books he opposed entirely and wouldn't go near, the books with the exchanges of lovely glances between dancing wargs, for he knew that homosexuality was so offensive to nature and decency that he would have been more than willing to blast every pervert off the face of the earth . . . and maybe some day he would. These dozens and dozens of bizarre cracks didn't particularly shock Tom, but he did, sadly, think that they could have found some more self-respecting way to earn their bread than to spread out their private and secret stuff to the meanderers of the world.

He was about to close the fourth or fifth magazine when . . . Jesus!

Here were two pages—no, wait, for Christ's sake, *four* pages of Arlene Jo.

His wife.

He shut the magazine, and opened it again. The title was "BUSTY BUSTS OUT!." The captions called her Busty Beer, but she was Arlene Jo Beatty. Arlene Jo Beatty Jura. No mistaking because there couldn't be any mistaking. the big, wide-set eyes, the knockers he had memorized, the

full mouth's pouty grin, the arched and always snotty left eyebrow, the crescent-shaped scar just below her left knee there was no mistaking.

Four full pages. Jesus. Sprawled back on a tufted sofa with her muff on cheap display for the meatbeaters. Hugging her stud with headlights. And then two pages of her with a guy—not even a right, flatbelly cat but some baldo with a fat gut and balls of hair on his fat shoulders. Pretending she was making it with him, and making it happy.

They hadn't seen each other, nor had Tom heard from or about her, in the five years since she had divorced him. She'd been a West Texas tramp when he'd met and married her, and she'd been a West Texas tramp when he'd left her. But she was his wife, goddammit. She would always be his wife, always be Arlene Jo Jara.

What was she displaying herself for? A fast couple of bucks? She was the mother of Tom Jara's baby girl. Jesus.

There were four copies of the magazine. He hid them under an other stack and strode out the door and down the block to nowhere, bumping into an old man and cursing him for his clumsiness.

I forgot, he thought.

I forgot what I can't ever forget again. They're all whores, dirty, diseased, filthy—every last one of them. And they'd destroy you if you give them half a chance.

"Okay, I dig," Tom quietly, coldly acknowledged. "You love me but you don't trust me. I dig. Great."

He and Georgia were at the lip of the Central Park boat basin on that early, peaceful Saturday evening, throwing popcorn to the pretty mama and baby swans. The chill and finality in Tom's tone slammed hard into Georgia, for she went tight and breathless—made clear at once that he hadn't understood. "How many times do I have to prove I never loved anybody and never will as much as you, Tommy, but—"

"Tom," he corrected.

"—but *this* stuff, this badger's game or whatever—isn't that what they call it? I couldn't go in for nothin' like that, Tom, not even for you, it's . . . it'd scare me so bad I'd, well . . ."

"Sure. Great," he said crisply. "Let's finish up feeding the pretty birds and I'll head you down to the train."

That slammed harder. "You said I could spend the whole night with you. I had to work my neck off to make my

father believe I was sleepin' over tonight at a girl friend's house. Ah, don't be sore, Tom, honey, I couldn't live if you ever got mad at me for real, I swear to God."

"Who's mad? Tom's only got one law: his old ladies go with him or they don't, and if they don't they're free to split for good. Simple."

She threw a handful of popcorn crumbs toward the water. The breeze blew them back at her. A gray-haired lady in a nurse's dress wheeled a baby carriage behind them and on down the stone path Georgia looked glum. "You won't let anythin' bad happen to me . . . ?"

"You're my chick. As long as that's true, you're as safe as that baby in that buggy."

Teaching her what to do was a cinch; once she satisfied him that she was ready to learn, she learned fast. When the evening began to deepen, he walked her out of the park, past the Coliseum to Broadway and across the street from The Prestona Hotel. He handed her a hotel doorkey marked 305 and said, "Go straight through the lobby to the elevator, it's self-service, and the room's on the third floor, to your left when you get out. You might have to wait an hour, could be more, but there's a TV in the room to keep you company."

He watched her go into the hotel. When ten minutes went by and she hadn't come out, he ambled to the sidewalk outside the Coliseum, where clusters of potbelly conventioneers were wearing identification badges on their lapels and chomping stogies and gabbing it up. With the Jara antennae, he milled about them, smelling out Johnny Pigeon. Johnny Pigeon would have a special forlorn expression on his flabby, high-blood-pressure face, it would hold a fuzzy, foolish, old-somewhere gaze, and it would confide, *I'm bad and Chan's back home in Very Christly, Ohio, and I'm horny for a no-trouble fling.* That expression, plus standing off just a little from the rest of the boosters, had spelled Johnny Pigeon in other cities and towns to Tom when he'd needed some quick bread. This town was no different.

"Excuse me, man, but maybe you or one of your friends over there might be in the mood for some lady fun tonight, no more than three blocks from here . . ." he said with a calm, confidential, soft-sell sincerity to the first lone Johnny Pigeon. The first lone Johnny Pigeon blinked at Tom, and shook his head—a real Very Christly, Ohio head shake—and drifted back to the safety of his cluster. The second and third and fourth Johnny Pigeons showed interest, but guilty

and suspicious interest, and each of them dismissed him.

The fifth Johnny Pigeon smelled of whiskey and came on guilty and suspicious, too, but after a volley of timid, nervous, jerk questions—all of them added up to: *Promise me she's sexy, and clean, and inexpensive, and guarantee me there'll be no trouble*—the arrangement was made, chiefly, Tom knew, because of the trust and faith he himself inspired. Johnny Pigeon was a fat shortie, born into his sixties, with *Lloyd A. Snyder, Russet Motor Co., New Hampshire* [illegible] on his lapel badge, and he wore a snappy, expensive [illegible] sucker suit and a one hundred watt diamond pinky ring. Tom muttered the Preston room number and directions. 'Knock two quick ones and say, 'It's Johnny.' Don't let Irma's shyness throw you. She plays [illegible] But she won't [illegible] you for money, so the first thing you do, put a ten spot down. When she's [illegible] sip her on extra five—that's [illegible] but only if you feel like it, we believe in being [illegible] with your [illegible] town visitors."

"How . . . uh . . . soon? Uh, when should I go there?"

"Any time. She's there now. Stay as long as you want to, but try to be out before nine. I have [illegible] the Copacabana Night Club, and she has to be in her dressing room pretty soon after nine."

"Uh, nine. This is sort of like . . . well, what, sort of like pin money for her, huh?"

"You got it, pal. Have a damn nice time."

Forty minutes later, Tom stepped out of the Preston self-service elevator on the [illegible] floor, the door to [illegible] swung like a chorus line [illegible] new hotel [illegible] the Celebrity had refused to let him register, despite the credit card, but then the room [illegible]. The Prestons had accepted the credit card [illegible] *Edwin F. Mayer, Jr., Las Vegas, Nev.*, and had given him the key to *305* without even looking for baggage. A locksmith off Broadway surely dog-way Tom wanted a copy of the key made, because the robber demanded ten bucks or nothing doing, but settled for a deuce. Tom then checked the room. Small, clean, perfect.

He stood at *305* now and listened, and the muffled, bed-springy sounds announced that the show was on the road. With his cheap flash-cube camera in one hand, he unlocked the door with the other and hurried into the lighted room and shut the door behind him. Before naked Johnny Pigeon could push naked Georgia off him, Tom clicked three

pictures in speedy succession, each one from a different angle of the bed but each one capturing Lover's alarmed face close to Georgia's. Tom nodded to Georgia, who scampered into the can and closed its door, and he strode to the seersucker pants, where he found a spanking-new leather billfold.

Johnny Pigeon didn't move, except to hold his knuckles against his mouth.

Tom didn't take the time to count the roll, but he spotted a fifty and at least three twenties. Rifling for cards and papers, he came upon a series of color snapshots. In red ink at the bottom of a snap of a horsey teenage chick was written, *To Daddy, Love Always, Betty Sue*. He showed it to Johnny Pigeon and drawled, "Not bad, Daddy. How many young bucks home've humped her, do you figure?"

That helped the man to stand. "You bum!" he yelled. "Take your bum hands off that or I'll—"

"You will?" Tom shuffled to him. "You will what, blubber? Tell me all about high-minded morality? No, you're too sharp a city slicker for that. Okay, go ahead now, climb into your threads while I read up on your life story."

Blubber did, trembling and sweating.

The cards, Tom sensed almost instantly, could have furnished lifetime pay dirt for someone creep enough to dig a career in blackmail; the cards claimed that Lloyd A. Snyder was hot in everything holy back home, from Boy Scouts to church to school board to town booster clubs to a gang more of good mines, man. As the booster dressed in a clumsy hurry, Tom said, "I never repeat myself, Lloyd, so listen good. You listening good, Lloyd A. Snyder of Endicott, New Hampshire? I hold onto this life story. You have the urge to come back here with a cop, that's your right as a decent, law-abiding citizen and I can't stop you. But then we can't stop the cop from developing these cute pictures in my camera, either, can we?"

"You . . . are . . . a . . . a . . ."

"A bum." Tom nodded. "A bum that wants that ice on your baby finger."

"Please . . . let me keep this. You keep the money, I won't fight you on that. But those pictures, those cards – they can't do you any good and they're very important to me. I've never cheated on Mrs. Sny—on my wife before. This would kill her, kill my whole wonderful family. Take the money and give me the rest. Please . . ."

"Beg, Blubber."

Son of a bitch if Booster didn't begin to fill up and then start to bawl. "I'm begging," he croaked.

"You know my name? I'm God," Tom said. "Say, 'You're God, and I love you, God.'"

The old booster was shocked.

"Say, 'You're God, and I love you, God,'" Tom repeated. "And you get some of that back, maybe all of it."

"I could never let Him know like that pass my lips," Howard Alexander of Lochaven, New Hampshire, swore.

"Not even for all this bread and Betty Sue's presence? Come on, lover, it only hurts for a second, and look how it pays off."

"You're—crazy!"

"The ring, lover."

"You're *crazy!*"

He dropped the ring on the bureau.

Tom smiled and nodded. "I guess you are, and you're a sport. Okay, here it is. Now swing back home and crawl on your knees to your hypocrite mother and pray to God for the salvation of your soul."

The booster let himself out.

There wasn't one fifty in the bundle; there were two. There weren't three twenties; there were five. There were seven tens, five fives, and too many single to bother about. Pocketing the fifties and twenties, Tom went to the corner and tried it. It was locked. "All clear, baby," he called. Georgia came out in her black slip, and her nipples made him throw his head back and laugh. "Why the formal entry?" he teased. "Who do you expect, the Pope?"

"Ah, don't make jokes about the Church, honey. That's what scares me people away and else, when you go sayin' things like that."

Tom looked down and plunked the bills in her hand. "Here. All this is for you. If the Church lays the spooks on you, all that much, spend some of this on a necktie and send it to the Pope. There's this, and you get whatever the pawnshop cat gives me for this ring."

Georgia counted. "—hundred and four, a hundred and five, a hundred and six! Like man and like wow, honey! What'd you say, it's all for me? I couldn't do that. You need it, at least half of it."

"I don't need anything, especially money. Money drags me. The last you brought me from home, I used it for rent when I had the shorts. This pays back the loan. I don't like

money, but you do, and I'll see that you're swimming in it, baby."

"But this . . . what we did here tonight . . . what was it for, if not the bread?"

He unbuttoned his shirt and kicked off his boots. "What was it for? Kicks. No, not kicks: power. Power. There's no power like it, watching the double-face hypocrite sinners sweat. Next time, you'll watch it in action: you won't cop out to the can. You'll dig what real power is."

"Oh no you don't. No you *don't*. There isn't gonna be a next time. You hear, Tom? You hear?"

Tom grinned and motioned for her to undress him. She did. She was nervous about staying the night here, she admitted, nervous that the booster would still bring the fuzz, but she eased up on the complaints when Tom stroked her in bed and told her all the wonderful things about her that she loved to hear.

"Man, but I love you," she whispered, a minute before she was about to burst.

"Then talk to me," he directed.

"I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you."

"Say, 'You're God, and I love you God.'

Her embrace tightened and her backside stopped thumping.

"Don't make me say that."

"Say it. And keep saying it till you make it."

A pause. A long, agonized pause.

"You're God, and I love you, God. You're God, and I love you, God. You're God . . ."

Because he had some money at last, and because a sharp hunch advised him to change neighborhoods before Times Square fuzz of one kind or another paid him an unexpected visit, Tom went looking for a new pad. The search took only a day and a half. With the help of a Greenwich Village newspaper, he found a furnished basement room on Cornelia Street. It was damp and dark, but it had space to move around in, and a toilet and tub; it cost only six dollars more a week than the Herald Hotel, and its entrance, down wooden stairs and past the garbage cans, was private.

Three days after the night at the Prestona, he phoned Georgia, read her his new address, and told her to bring Shirley along.

Georgia cut school the next day and came, but alone. "Hey, this is high society, compared to that hotel," she

babbled cheerfully. "There's a whole lot we can do to brighten it all up."

"I don't plan to hang here that long. Where's Shirley?"

Georgia wouldn't meet his gaze. "Shirley said no, honey. She said she's out, she don't want to see you."

"Give me that again."

"Well, for one thing, it's hard for her to sneak away; it's a bugger for me, too, but her mother watches her like a hawks. The other reason . . ."

"Yeah. Read me the other reason."

"Well, let's see how to say it."

"Say it. Straight."

"Maybe it's part my fault, Tommy Tom. I opened my big mouth and went and told her about—you know, last Saturday night. I guess I shouldn't've. I was, you know, just feeling it. I couldn't keep it in, and who'm I gonna tell about it, my priest? Anyway, Sharl took it like the world was over. She said what I did was wrong, and she still don't know it she come to town you'd try to make her do the same thing. What else can *I* say?"

"Wait here? Did I make you do anything? Did I say I'd bust your legs if you didn't? Do you think you did anything all that wrong?"

"You want to do something funny? I couldn't go for that stuff that night, but . . . Last Christmas, I kept thinkin' about it some, and I took I did like it, sort of. It was . . . well, I did get a jolt on of it." She took Tom's hand. "Anyway, if you ask me, it's good riddance about Sharl. She's just about my best friend, I guess, but I never did dig you having *two* old ladies. I want to be Number One, the one and only."

Tom gave her thirty dollars for the booster's ring, and insisted it was worth that, there was no reason to say the man had brought it over. The delighted Georgia complained that she would have to catch the 8:55 back to Cameron because the school play she was supposed to be practicing for would let out at ten, so they left the pad early to look for action on the Village streets. They approached Dusty's Dimension, a dyke cedar bar in the West Village he had scouted out the evening before, and he explained what she was to do, pleased that she wasn't only obedient but at least halfway ready for some action. He went to the coffee shop directly across the street as she entered the bar, and he sat with coffee at the counter, facing the shop's glass

window where he could see the comings and goings at Dusty's Dungeon.

He nursed two coffees for nearly three-quarters of an hour, and then she came out with a woman in slacks and cardigan sweater. He paid up and followed them, always a half-block behind, until they reached the red door of a narrow old apartment house crushed between two old, larger buildings. The dyke opened the red door with a key and she and Georgia disappeared inside. Tom crossed the street, looked up at all the windows of the three-story house, and waited. Before long he saw a light go on at the second floor window. He waited ten minutes more and moved lightly to the red door, where there were three buzzers with name-plates. He buzzed *N. Bolton, No. 2,* and presently a rattling sound released the red door. He made the flight two and three steps at a time. The single door on the second floor was red, too, and he heard music and pressed the bell.

"Who's that?" someone bawled.

"Jerry."

"Jerry who?"

"Jerry."

The door unlocked and opened less than an inch, but he recognized the dyke, and moved so fast that he needed almost no force to push his way in. The startled dyke was dressed, and so was the pretend startled Georgia. "What in the—" the dyke began.

"Anyone else here besides you two?" he asked Georgia, looking around. The pad's living room hadn't been furnished for royalty, but it wasn't Skid Row, either.

"No," Georgia said.

The dyke was roaring. "Who in the hell are you and what in the hell—"

Tom punched her in her tight belly, and she fell to the rug, and let out a scream the instant she had the breath. He sank to his knees beside her and punched her face with his fists until there was blood and until she was out, and after. He glanced up at Georgia. Georgia was frozen in ecstasy.

They hurried. Tom raced through the pad, grabbing up everything in sight that looked valuable and small enough to stuff into his pockets. Georgia helped herself to the dyke's wrist watch and the billfold in the dyke's shoulder purse. "Let's go," Tom ordered.

"My God, honey, you must've knocked half of her teeth out—"

"I said let's go. We don't run. We walk out nice and relaxed."

In his basement room, they counted twelve dollars. Tom allowed that the cigarette lighter might be gold, and those earrings and this brooch might hold some fair loot. He grinned. "I wish I had a picture of you back there, all those jollies on your face, like you were making it."

"Wow, did it *show*?" she squealed and reddened. He nodded. "I'm embarrassed," she murmured. He laughed, and hugged her.

The next time she was able to come to New York—three days later, the day after her school finished for the summer—Georgia gave him a seven-pound tape recorder in a leather case. "I figured you could do your songs and listen to them back," she said. "It isn't much. I'd like to give you the moon."

"Where'd you get this?"

"None of your business," she giggled. "I bought it at a store for a thousand dollars."

She turned on that evening with some pot she'd brought. By the time they left the pad she was stoned damned near out of her skull, but she wasn't the kind of disgusting mess he usually saw and despised in most chick pinheads. Arlene Jo, for instance, always became three-tongued gutter storm the minute she got high. They were strolling up a shadowy and empty sidewalk in the East Village that evening when Georgia suddenly stopped and squeezed Tom's arm. He followed her eyes to a big, round-shouldered, bushy-haired man waving toward them near the curb. "Whom whom," Georgia marveled softly, "but did my skin ever crawl for a second . . . I was sure that was my father. Whom. Twins, almost. The same build, exactly."

"He's coming on like he could use some help."

Georgia beamed. "Let's grab us a little kick, okay, man?"

"Your thing, baby."

Tom stood away, where he could see and not be seen. Georgia sat on the nearest brownstone's top stoop, yanked her mini back, crossed her legs, and held up an unlit cigarette. The man waved close, and paused and blinked at the country mile of legs and thigh.

"Wouldn't have a match on you, would you?" she invited.

The hulking dummy simpered, although he looked sick, and patted his pockets, again and again and still again. "Somewhere," he rumbled, and lost his footing and bumped beside her, one step below.

"What's got *you?*" she laughed.

The gorilla simpered some more. "Drank some drink. 'Pologize."

"Don't apologize. You look groovy to me."

"Yep, groovy. Yep." His hand, slow and gentle, a hand the size of a beef rump, got free along the line of her thigh. "Here's groovy."

"Mmmmm. Friendly-like."

"Name's Lee. Leo. And feeling poorly, and looking for groovy. Let's be friends."

Tom watched her release the gorilla's zipper and reach in. "Friends? You got nothin' here to be friends with!" she said. But barely a moment later, she made a nervous giggling sound and said, "Wow, wait, I spoke too soon. We can be real *good* friends now, man, yeah?" and the gorilla mumbled something and started to paw her and she wasted no time. She kissed him hard as she undid his belt, and she had to help him climb on, and soon the lower half of her was having a ball but her glazed eyes were on us on Tom and her hands motioned for him to crack the gorilla's head. Tom drew the switchblade from his pocket and pressed the blade button. Georgia came entirely alive and cried, "Yeah! Go! Go!"

The blade sank deep between the gorilla's shoulders, and he tensed for only a second, but he didn't fall sideways because Georgia was clutching him now, still taking him, faster and faster and in a laughing frenzy till she was finished, and Tom guessed he knew why she was laughing. the gorilla might be dead, but he had an erection.

Tom tugged at the knife, and freed it. "We split," he said.

A block away, safe, Georgia stopped running to catch her breath, but she was still flying. "Man, man, like rap about groove that was *it!*" she exclaimed, "Christmas, I hope you didn't hurt him bad."

"No."

Later, in Tom's arms, she confided, "I must be freakin' out good. You know what flashed in my head when I dug you holding that knife?"

"What?"

"To have you cut off his whatchie for me, for a souvenir." She giggled. "Oh, crap with the guts for sayin' that. I bet there's not a chick ever lived that didn't think about that and want that, just for a split second. You don't think I've freaked, do you honey? It's just a—what do they call it?—just a fantasy, like. It doesn't mean nothin'."

Tom wakened in the morning with a grinding dread, a dark certainty that something very bad was about to happen to him. It had no shape, no form, nor could he bring himself to discuss it with Georgia for she would learn that he was able to experience fear. He told her to stay with him. Georgia couldn't. She was dying to, he assured, but she couldn't.

Walking with her toward the subway—too close to Dusty's Dungeon, damn it—he spotted a broad-beamed, flyaway woman and a muscled sport in a striped polo shirt gawking at him and Georgia, as though in recognition. Georgia spotted them, too, and instinctively walked faster. "That lady was at the bar the other night," she said. "She saw me and Miss Bolton leave together. Do you think—"

"It's all right." Tom lied. In spite of himself, he glanced behind him before they turned the corner. The sport was following them.

"Get in that subway and disappear. I'll call you," he said and slipped into the first store he came upon, a card shop. He charged to the back, in search of a rear door. There was none, so he examined the greeting cards for many minutes, and left the shop when he decided he was acting like a jerk. Again in spite of himself, he glanced around. He thought he saw the sport, up the block, but he couldn't be sure.

He went home, taking all the detours he could, not once looking behind him.

And sat, gravely frightened, in his basement pad throughout the day. At one point he played and sang *Mountain Man* into his new tape recorder. When it would not rewind because he could not follow the pamphlet's instructions, he hurled the machine against the damp brown brick wall.

Why wasn't *anything* going right? Why wasn't this town opening up to him? He was special, and nobody cared. His songs were special, they were truth, and all the more so because of how he told them with his guitar. What hurt, what still hurt so much, was being called a second rater, even by a jealous tenth rater like that music publisher, Coles. Why couldn't they admit he was first rate, as good as he was because he'd slaved his ass off to be first rate?

When darkness came, Tom went to the corner and phoned Georgia's number in Cameron, with no idea of what he would say. Her daddy answered, so he replaced the receiver and bought a carton of chocolate milk, some Swiss cheese, two bars of Almond Joy, and the *News*. Back in his room, his fear was gradually replaced by an oppressive loneliness.

but that was better, for prison had taught him to handle loneliness. He read the *News* as he ate, read about the hot shots with one fiftieth of his talents who had real power over the scum and the dummies.

Go to sleep, he ordered himself at last. Tomorrow, something will click. Tomorrow you'll own everything and everyone.

Because the dark had always disturbed him, he left the toilet light on, as he did every night. He willed himself within minutes to sleep.

He was brought awake by the insistent tapping of what might have been a key at his glass windowed door.

Don't move, he warned himself.

The tapping continued. He got out of bed and pulled the thready green blind just far enough to peer out. A man was there, not the muscled sport in the striped polo shirt.

"Open," he heard. He stood back. The door was locked, and it was going to stay locked.

The glass broke. In pious horror, Tom watched a hand reach in and unlock the door. The man entered, carrying the crowbar he'd busted the glass with, a six foot ape with teased, bleached-blond hair. He was followed by the muscled sport, who shut the door.

"I have one question to ask before we make love, laddie," the ape said in a frail's voice. "Did you enjoy roughing up our friend Norm Bolton, or was it strictly business?"

"Who? You got the wrong—"

Then they both were on him, with a hundred fists and a white heat rage that sincerely baffled him, and soon Tom Jara was unconscious.

There were no profound sensations of pain when he came to, shortly after dawn, but his right eye would not open, and his breathing made rattling noises, and he was barely able to drag himself across the room to the toilet. He got there, though, and slowly, now in agony, lifted himself and dumbly studied his reflection in the soapstreaked mirror. His right eyelid, twice the size of his left, was blue and black and no amount of warm water would raise it. His lower lip was puffed and cut. His nose looked, felt, broken. There were scrapes and patches of dried blood on his forehead and cheeks and chin.

That face. That great, sensitive, beautiful face.

He crawled to the bed and fell heavily on his back, sure that his bones were chipped, busted, fractured.

Cameron.

George's town. Shirley's town. Cameron, Connecticut.

Yeah. I'll go there.

What did she say on the phone? I never said anything to them.

Chapter 4

1

Ritchie Atkins braked to a stop in front of the lighted Forbes house at three A.M. and groaned, "Uh oh. Someone's still up. You want me to come in and catch hell with you, Nance?"

"No. Good night, Ritchie."

Nancy's father was relieved, and then practically purple. She said that she and Ritchie and some others had gone riding, nowhere in particular, after the dance, and everyone had lost track of the time. Her father stormed that he'd called Mrs. Evans at her school, that she hadn't been at the dance.

"All right, then I'm a liar," she replied evenly, and ran up to her bedroom and locked its door. Seconds later, he knocked. "I'm going to sleep," she called. Presently she heard nothing, and gathered he'd decided against a ruckus, with the sleeping Marcia so near by.

Nancy slept fitfully, hard, fitfully again, and when she wakened in midmorning nothing had changed, she had imagined none of it; she *had* done something unforgivable by worrying him so, and had done it purposely. In her robe, hoping Daddy would be out of the house and hoping he would be in the house and would confront her, she went downstairs. He was in his easy chair in the sunstreamed living room, surrounded by the Sunday *Times*. She went to the kitchen. Aunt Marcia had gone off to church, but her delicious-smelling coffee was in the electric pot and ready, as it was every morning. Nancy poured some into the coffee mug that had "Paw's" printed on it, took a deep, irresolute breath, and carried it to the living room.

Almost disappointingly, Daddy wasn't purple, nor did he even look especially grim. She managed a shaky, "Good morning," and he nodded and motioned her out of the hallway and into the room.

"There are a number of different ways I can deal with

this," he said, sounding firm yet far too calm. "I could beat you with a cat o' nine tails or make you stay indoors till you're twenty-one, but I doubt if either of those approaches would solve much of anything. Or I could simply ask you what you thought you proved. Sit down."

"I'm fine right—"

"Sit down."

She did, and stared at the carpet and hugged the coffee mug close to her.

"I'm going to hear the truth, Nancy. If I get the impression I'm hearing only part of it, you and I are going to take a drive to the Atkins' house."

"Don't bring him and his family into this. Please. The whole thing was my doing. Ritchie just went along with it."

"Then talk to me. First of all, why that stupid lie about the dance?"

"Because I was afraid you wouldn't believe what really happened."

"Which was?"

"We had dinner at Navarro's, and were more than halfway to the dance and I just didn't want to go. I wasn't sure what I did want to do, but I knew I didn't want to spend the evening with those jerky kids at the dance. We drove to Carlisle Beach, and walked up and down on the sand, and out on the pier, and we just talked."

"Talking till three in the morning is a powerful lot of talking."

She nodded, and continued to gaze away from him. "But that was all that happened, honestly. I like Ritchie. I liked listening to him talk about what he thinks of the world, even the ideas I didn't agree with or understand." Then, without planning to, she raised her father directly. "There was something else. The reason I didn't let us come home till so late was that I *did* want you to be worried. I'm ashamed. I was ashamed all the while I was picturing you here, probably pacing the floor—but I wanted to get back at you somehow."

"Mm. Naturally, that crossed my mind, too. 'Back at,' I take it, is translated, 'Frau Townes.'" Again Nancy nodded. "Okay. But there might've been a less melodramatic device for getting the point over to me."

Her nods were vociferous now and she prayed she wouldn't cry. "I'm so terribly fouled up, Daddy. And selfish and dumb and thoughtless and cruel. I lost Mother. Sometimes when I'm not being rational—I guess that's most of the

time I tell myself I couldn't survive it if I lost you, too. That's—dumb, I know. I don't like being dumb because I know I'm not, but I . . . oh, *hell!*"

And then she did cry.

Daddy bounded to her and held her and kissed her head, and that made her cry harder. "Shh shh shh," he comforted. "All problems can be worked through, even a quote catastrophic unquote problem like this one."

Nancy didn't believe him, couldn't believe him, for there was no way to work it through. But she loved his holding her, loved his forgiving her.

Her school, Miss Barnaby's, and Ritchie Atkins' school, Susquehanna, finished for the summer two weeks earlier than did Cameron's public schools. Most of the Miss Barnaby's girls with whom Nancy was at all tight had summer plans. Those few who had not yet been to Europe or those who still enjoyed traveling through it with their parents would go there with their parents. Four other girls had talked their parents into letting them go overseas with one another and no adult—a trip she was certain Daddy wouldn't have allowed her to make. Rox Saxon and Crystal Redfern and Sally Ives would stay in Cameron and loaf the summer through at the country club. Pat Ronan, who had tried LSD and peed, and Gretch Holt, who had tried speed and boys, lots of boys, would go together to a commercially remote spot deep in Maine, far from any town, where Pat's father's college roommate and wife and friends lived and hiked and populated during the summer months. What the trusting Mr. Ronan didn't know, Pat and Gretch confided with giggles to Nancy, was that the college roommate and wife and friends owned and used and were eager to share every drug under the freaking sun.

They tried to persuade Nancy to join them. "It'll be six or seven weeks of a nonstop bust," Gretch Holt assured. "What you need is some loosening up, anyway, Forbes. Just tell your father about those healthy Maine woods. He won't put up any scuffle."

Nancy stayed in Cameron, and stuck with Ritchie Atkins. Ritchie was occasionally too earnest and sober—"I'm damned if I can go around stoned when too many citizens in the wealthiest nation on the face of the earth go to bed hungry, if they *have* a bed"—and she suspected that she rather agreed with Daddy, who'd come to like Ritchie and had privately remarked to her, in no way as a serious putdown, that Ritchie

tended to have instantaneous cures for unidentified diseases. But she liked Ritchie, too, respected even his pompousness and semi baked judgments and verdicts, admired his zealous commitment to draft resistance ("I'll rot in prison before I'll take any part in a war machine that's out to destroy human beings"), to fighting air and water pollution with petitions, to saving a ragged, beautiful mountain at the edge of Cameron that some big industry from the Midwest was arranging to level in order to build a smoky factory, to helping Blacks, to helping American Indians to—every cause that mattered.

Because 'helping' (the word Ritchie used most often, not always pompously) struck her as a more useful and rewarding way to spend the summer than following the narrow roads of the Rozes and Gretches and Pats, Nancy helped. She *had* been honest with Daddy about that Saturday night, essentially. She and Ritchie *had* only talked, essentially: the kisses, the pettings had been high school freshman fooling around, almost as if he had concluded that there were infinitely more vital and pressing things to get passionate about than a mere girl.

Then, one cloudy Monday afternoon in the second week of June, they were in the vestry of the Unitarian Church on Branhoover Street, stuffing envelopes with Save Sanderson Mountain appeals. The other volunteer staffers, two by two and one by one, left for the day. They were alone. Without preparing her for it, Ritchie seized her arm and kissed her—as usual, his beard scratched—and his frown was very intense, and he asked, "Are you a virgin?"

The question was abrupt and indelicate, yet, from Ritchie, not offensive: she'd become used to his unexpected sledgehammers. Smiling, probably blushing, she said, determined to keep it light, "You ask that like you're asking if I wear shoes to bed."

"*Do* you wear shoes to bed?"

She laughed. "Sure. Every night."

"*Are* you a virgin?"

Careful, she thought. "Well, why do you want to know, as if I didn't know?"

"Because I'm one, and I've decided it's silly. We have two young, healthy bodies. We should be using them to know each other and ourselves better."

"Excuse me, Mr. Atkins, but we're here to save Sanderson Mountain *and* our virtue. Let's finish up and go for a swim, okay?"

The sticky subject was gradually put to rest, at least suspended, and she was relieved.

And not relieved. She wasn't in love with Ritchie, nor did she expect she ever would be. The prospect of their making love set off no rockets within her, certainly not. Like the thought of it with Flip Byron, handsome and strong Flip. (And she still frequently did think of him, although Flip had evidently, and perhaps wisely, dropped her.) In some perverse way, maybe it did make sense to go all the way with Ritchie—not with love but with the conscious absence of it.

I'll see, she thought. And thought about it over the next week, though only at intervals, for much of her need to keep Daddy worried was gone. They were close again. They could stay close . . .

Then, on a blister of a hot day at the country club, she was about to begin mixed doubles with Ritchie and Crystal and Shep Hubbard when she spotted Daddy in the next court. Daddy and Mrs. Townes, playing with lust, youthful verve and full enjoyment, enjoyment of each other. He made one spectacular shot catching the divorced woman brilliantly off guard, and Nancy watched the two of them running to meet at the net, saw the smiling woman reach out to him and congratulate him with a quick embrace.

"Nancy! Your serve!" Shep called.

Minutes after the start of the mixed doubles, she observed Mike Townes and Ruthanne Cumberland coming from the area of the links. Mike saw Nancy, and waved.

And she waved back, and knew who her first all the way lover would be. And why.

2

"My parents taught me that making love is horrid and dirty," said Monica Spencer. "Is that what your parents taught you, Flip?"

"Pretty much. Yes," Flip said, his mouth unbearably dry.

"Let's show them how horrid and dirty *they* are, shall we?"

What surprised him first was that, once begun, slivers of fear remained but the clumsiness vanished. She was the reason. She wasn't pouncing, wasn't taking charge. When

he unfastened the top of her two piece swim suit, she smiled at his sharp intake of breath at the sight of her, but there was no smartass talking, no directing. It was as if she sensed that he was rattled enough. He rushed at her tall, elegant breasts and her beckoning body on the lounge chair that made a terrible bed, and she was breathing hard, too, and she said, "You're beautiful."

"You're the one that's beautiful."

"Yes, darling, we both are. And ready. So very ready. Oh, my, why do you look so worried?"

"I'm afraid I won't be able to be quick. Hell . . ."

"No, Hell, Flip. Heaven. Here. Your Heaven is my Hell. Here, Flip, dearest."

"I'll be too quick."

"Of course you will. But only this itme."

What surprised him next was his steady control. And maybe she was the reason for that, as well, sensations crowded and shoved, but she seemed to know when to move with him and when to help him, to slacken for moments and when he could endure it no more and abruptly lost the control, she was raining darting kisses on his face and his throat as though to tell him this wild, perfect thing was happening for her, too.

She kissed him some more when it was done and he was still shaky. "How I needed your canned peaches," she sighed.

"Pears."

"Don't quibble. Was it good for you, Flip?"

"Dumb question."

"So I gather, but I imagined it would be polite to ask." She kissed his nose and swung her legs gracefully over the side of the chair and carried her glass and her lighter to the bar. He, sitting, his eyes following Flip watched her smooth, rounded buttocks recede as she walked, and it was the craziest thing that he thought he might be able to go again, right away. She lit a cigarette and poured more whiskey into her glass, and she began to speak before she turned to him. "For the first time in . . . well, forever . . . I have the peculiar feeling that I've just done something wicked."

"What's wicked?"

"Some of the hippest people I love and respect would say I'm, you should excuse the expression, impairing the morals of a minor."

He groaned and folded his arms. "Right. Corrupter of youth."

Monica Spencer laughed. God, what a marvelous, deep

gut, happy laugh'—and set the glass down and held his cheeks between her hands. "Yes, isn't it lovely?" she exclaimed. Then she was serious for just a moment. "It's awfully important that you know something, my beautiful friend: I don't trap clean-limbed young men in my hair as a matter of course. Truly I don't. Please know that."

"I'm glad you trapped this one."

"Are you? Really?" Her smile was bright, and suddenly Flip saw a child, openly pleased at being praised.

She didn't want him to go that day, nor did Flip, enthralled, want to go. For a movie star used to the spotlight, she didn't talk much about herself. She asked him about himself, his family and his play and his life, and he talked with growing ease, editing here and there, and he was certain he sounded like a prize klutz, and maybe she was just acting, but she appeared to be riveted with interest. They walked, nude, from room to room, in the big house that she seemed childishly anxious to show off. They showered together, and kept dropping the soap. They made love again, this time better and more surely, in her wide, long bed, and she declared, 'You are never leaving here, my beautiful friend with the beautiful soul and the beautiful instrument. I've decided to name Rodney. I've locked us in and swallowed the key, and until death do us part we're going to sing limitless variations of this grand new song, ten times an hour, seven days a week."

Flip left her at seven o'clock. But not before she softly said, "You've made me less frightened."

"*You*, frightened? Of what?"

"Only my shadow. Drive safely, dearest Flip—for your sake and for mine. I want you to keep coming back to me, to hold me."

He arrived home that evening, depleted and exhilarated, to an unexpected celebration. His brother Howie had flown in from Hawaii, without having written or phoned ahead, for a few days before shipping out for Southeast Asia. His mother was chirping with joy. The old man's buttons were busting.

"Hey, you look terrific, Howie," Flip greeted. There seldom had been much love lost between him and the meathead brother who was the old man's favorite, and he realized now how much he really disliked Howie.

"Hey, you too, kemo," Howie boomed, and punched his freckled fist into Flip's arm. He was a physical carbon of

the old man, husky but leaning toward beef, the pale eyes too small for the large round red face that somehow managed to look vacant and pugnacious, simultaneously. "You must be making plenty of time with the broads."

"Such talk," their mother beamed.

"Get a load of what the Services done for this soldier boy," the old man enthused. "They pounded a couple inches off of his belly, and they gave him a staff sergeant!"

"That's great," Flip said.

"All he says," their mother said. "I wish they weren't sending you all the way to the other end of the world. I won't sleep till you're back home. Hawkeyens far enough away."

"Women," the old man said, and winked.

The family had had dinner early, in Howie's honor, but his mother said she'd saved a piece for Flip, that all he had to do was throw it on the stove. Their kid brother Army chewed and pouted, asked Howie how many gooks he was going to kill, and Howie and the old man laughed and winked at each other. The old man disappeared from the living room for a while, and Flip didn't interrupt as Howie explained why it was necessary to clean things up once and for all in Asia Land. The old man returned, dressed in his own Army uniform, complete with sharpshooter medal, and everyone laughed, even Flip, because the old man was too fat and old. "Who you laughin' at?" he bellowed, laughing with them. "I bet Uncle Sam'd accept me back in a minute. The Reds'd take one gander at me, and I'd *scare* 'em all to death!"

The word that Howie Burton was home must have spread fast, for the phone rang a lot, and Howie kept getting called to it. Each time it rang, the sharp fantasy swept across Flip's mind that it was from Monica Spencer, summoning him to Last Bank Road. In the kitchen, making himself a salami sandwich, he had to repeat to himself that what had happened on Last Bank *had* happened, and, for a nutty moment, there was the heavy urge to swagger into the living room and cry out, "Listen, hero, you got yourself a staff sergeant's stripe, but *I* spent the afternoon in the sack with Monica Spencer!"

Later that evening, he took a walk with Howie, who was still at it about the Army. "It's not a bad life," Howie said. "You do what you're supposed to do, everything works out." He kneaded his freckled fist into Flip's arm. "Say, they'll be drawing your number in a couple of years, right? You

know what you ought to do, kiddo? Join up before they catch you. You get a wider choice of how you want to make it in the Service that way."

Feeling cocky, feeling it might be time to shake up the carbon copy of Fred Byron, Senior, Flip answered, "I'll tell you how I want to make what, Howie. I'm planning on becoming emperor of the world, and my first act will be to pass a new law. I'll get rid of every army's age limits. I won't close up the armies, but I'll make them really democratic. No more of this eighteen to mid-twenties draft stuff. If guys my age want to enlist, fine. But if guys the old men's age want to enlist, that's better yet."

"Yeah, I can just see it: old geezers out on the battlefield. What're they gonna do, slap each other?"

"How they fight is their business. If old men are brave enough to declare the wars, let them back their patriotism up by fighting the wars, too. Those old guys—the Persians, the Nazis, the Carthaginians, the Americans, all of them—they've always agreed on one thing: the young guys should do the dying. All right, let them agree to have *their* balls shot off for a change. Simple."

Howie the klutz frowned, as if he couldn't be sure if he should be hearing what he *was* hearing. "You know, I always pegged you as a bright kid. You're talkin' here like some kind of a goddamn coward or something!"

"Maybe I'm considering it."

"Boy, if Pop ever heard you with that line of shit . . ."

"What shit? That men his age should have the democratic right to go into battle? Hell, the other day I saw him carry a full box of Sunkist Oranges across the whole length of the store, and he wasn't puffing for more than half a minute after he was through. It seems such a damn shame he has to sleep in his own bed, just because of old rules and regulations that could be changed in a minute."

Howie the klutz bristled. "Let's go back to the house. You're a punk kid that don't know what you're talkin' about, like all those Commie Jew faggy SDS'ers and them. I oughta turn you in!"

Flip grinned. "Oh, I'm just horsing around, Howie," he said, and kneaded *his* fist into the klutz's arm. "I'm ready and willing to go, tomorrow, tonight. And if you and I are really lucky, maybe the old man'll have the chance to hang *two* gold stars in the store window."

Home, he left the bewildered Howie to the family and called, "Good night." The steps creaked under his weight

as he climbed the wide stairs of the eighty-year-old house, the house that seemed to lead itself to death, its large, shadowy rooms and creaky floors full of mournful mystery, of gloom, despite all the bright light bulbs and despite his mother's persuade experiments with gay colors. He closed his bedroom door after him, the room he liked and wished he could transport to some other house. Everything was his, the books, the records and the player, the trophies and plaques, the correspondence he'd kept up for the past three years with Mathilde Ferratta whom he'd never met, from Corsica, where he'd never been. He stripped and fell heavily into bed. On the wall in front of the bed were the two five-foot-long posters he'd bought in New York, the picture of the Colosseum and the picture of Michelangelo's David. David had perplexed his father. "What are you, some type of a fairy, hangin' dirty pictures of a fella up on the wall?" Fred Byron, Senior, had asked to know.

He perplexed his father. He perplexed his klutz brother. For no reason except to hear and watch the bewilderment, he said things to big people not worth bagging, and so he knew, he perplexed himself.

But tonight wasn't last night and all the other nights, when he had been nowhere and nothing. The smell of Monica Spencer was still on his body, the taste of her still on his lips, the recollections of every minute of her clear and vivid and very much before him.

Had today happened?

Yes.

Howie was asleep when Fip came to breakfast in the morning, and the old man was livid. "You had to go spoil your brother's furlough, didn't you, with your filthy Commie talk?" he blazed. "He told me what sort of crap you were slinging last night."

"Well, I'm sure he got it all wrong, or it was heard all wrong," Fip replied evenly, angry that his father could, just a little, still scare him. "Whatever I said, I was kidding," he added, angered even more by his own cowardice.

Kidding the service of your country isn't kidding, mister. You got that? *Never!*"

"Okay."

The day was Wednesday, delivery day to East Bank Road, and Mrs. Carmody came on only a little surprised when Fip asked if she'd tell Miss Spencer that he was there. "Miss Spencer's out of town, till tomorrow, or maybe a week,"

the housekeeper explained and, Flip suspected, lied. "She didn't say when she'd be back."

On Friday morning, before he left for school, the old man was preparing to drive Howie to the airport. The brothers shook hands and Howie directed, "Don't go around putting patriotism down, kid. A guy that won't protect his country's got no right to live in it."

"Good luck, Howie."

On Saturday afternoon she still wasn't back, or she'd ordered Mrs. Carmody to say she wasn't back. When the woman wasn't looking, Flip read the telephone number on the kitchen phone and jotted it down as soon as he reached the panel truck.

On Monday night he called the number, and Monica Spencer answered on the second ring. "Remember me?" he said. "Flip."

". . . Yes. I remember all important people and events. I . . . think it's best we don't see each other again, Flip."

"What's best about it? Why shouldn't we?"

"Because I spell trouble—with two b's. It can't . . . no, Flip, no more. You're a dear, but just keep away."

"I can be there fast."

"I'll repeat it once more: No!" she said sharply, and hung up.

Delivering the Wednesday afternoon order, he didn't ask for or about her, pretended it didn't matter.

On Thursday evening he was in his room, trying to grind through solid geometry. The phone rang, but he decided someone downstairs could answer it.

His mother called up to him, "Freddie? Telephone. A Miss Eastbank on the phone. Who's Miss Eastbank?"

"Hang up when I get on, okay?"

Waiting a moment, he lifted the receiver, said, "Okay," and heard his mother hang up. Then: "Hello."

"There are four Byrons in the Cameron directory," Monica Spencer said. "You're the second Byron."

"Yeah. I've noticed that."

"Do come here tonight. Please."

"After that last call the other night?"

"That was a mistake. There wasn't any call."

Don't throw her the idea you're always ready to jump through a hoop, hers or anybody's. "There's this work I have to do."

"Please. Bring your play. Please."

"About an hour," he said.

"Less," she said, and he heard the click.

She was standing in the middle of the long driveway as he drove up, her feet planted wide apart but her arms circling wildly in the air, and Flip screeched brakes, sure there was trouble. He sprang out. "What's wrong?"

"You haven't kissed me in ages, that's what's wrong."

"You nut!"

"And how. But a cute one. Isn't that a precious moon? Come with me, darling, and I'll show you it and the moors."

"You hung up on me on Monday. What goes with you?"

"I told you: There wasn't any call." Every light in the estate, up ahead, seemed to go on. She took his hand, and she smelled of liquor and tobacco and sweet, dewy cologne, and they walked in the direction away from the big house, both of them unsteady, into a dark wood where they sank onto dry grass and where he could feel her trembling in his arms even after the first barrage of rushed, deep drawn kisses. "How strong you are," she breathed, and her trembles that kept up conveyed to him that she was in a hurry, but she said nothing nor made any move that even hinted he wasn't the man, the director, and she helped with the row of buttons down the front of her dress only because he was clumsy at it, and when she hungrily spoke his name and made tiny gasping sounds as his mouth found her warm breasts, he knew that she had called for him, *him*, Flip Byron, *I'm*. Then she was desperately taking at him, at Rodney, her hands flying and soft lips mischievously probing, murmuring a crowded stream of words that George Kwarcesky from the Five Points Road would make lovely obscene and Monica Spencer made poetic. He stopped her in time — just — and she suddenly retreated from him and playfully slapped his belly, and he could see her in outline as she rose quickly to her feet, and the little girl in her challenged, "Bet'cha can't catch *me!*"

She ran, and the night swallowed her. Flip followed her general direction, between and around trees and brush in the tricky wood that she knew but he don't. For minutes, too many minutes of stillness broken only by the chatter of crickets, he walked and called, and walked and called, now angry, now concerned, now puzzled by the impulsive looniness of her, the wonder of her. Very close to his ear, then, he heard, "Hey, senor," and turned, startled. "You wonna meet my keed seester? Mucho clean, amigo, she study hard in school to be a gringo, and she's a steal for two dolla."

"You *nut!*"

"Ah, how you wound with words. I was just trying to lower Rodney's fever for a moment or two." She touched Rodney. "See? Now we can start all over again."

He was many inches taller than she, but they made love standing, awkwardly for a time and then gracefully, very gracefully, passionately, magically, as everything with Monica Spencer was magical. "Oh, my beautiful friend, my beautiful friend . . ." she purred, and charmed with him, and groaned delight, nails sharp in his shoulders, teeth cutting into his lip, and the explosion was shattering.

Her string of wisecracks as they found their clothes and dressed and walked back toward the lighted house annoyed and insulted Flip, and he wished he could order her to either be as solemn and reverential about what they had done or to just shut up, the gags and, worse, the lightness continued, though, almost as if she were telling him, *I'm joking it up because I don't dare admit yet that I'm falling in love with you.* In the driveway, near his Chevvy, her steps dragged and her smile was huge yet somehow removed as she squeezed his hand, and she said, "Good night, darling sweet prince Flip."

"It's early," he protested.

"Not for Dame May Whitty. I'll have to look some of what used to be my best at a luncheon appointment in the city tomorrow, and that means lots and lots of sleep. You do understand."

I understand a brushoff, he wanted to say. Instead he said, "You asked me to bring along my play."

"Of course. Did you?" He retrieved the wrinkled-cover copy from the Chevvy's front seat, dropped it, picked it up, and she laughed and accepted it. "I promise to read it soon and be ruthlessly honest. If I think it's good, I'll say so and you'd love me forever. If I don't think it's good, I'll say so and you'll smite me with your wrath and go around telling everyone I'm a lettucehead critic and a lousy lay. But them's the conditions what prevail."

"You'll be here on Saturday?"

"Yes, probably, but don't expect me to've read this by then. In fact, don't press me at all about it, all right, darling? When I'm ready to give you an opinion, for whatever it might be worth, I'll give it." She saw that he was sharing none of her smiles, appeared to sense that her manner since the wood, offhanded and dismissing and basically rejecting, bewildered and disappointed him. "The Spencer radar is

on," she said. "It just delivered a bulletin that you've cross with me."

"No, but sort of confused. If you want me to split because you need sleep, fine. But the bulletin I just got from *my* radar says you're like putting me down."

"Oh, mercy, mercy," she sighed and opened the Chevy's door and brusquely commanded. "Get in that car." Fup did, partly because she pushed him, and she shut the door, not quite slamming it. She turned on her heel and he was sure this was it, that he'd messed the future up for good. She marched, though not to her house. She reached around the car's hood to the radio knob, opened it and she said, "You're an alien, you numbskull female, but I love the brains in his head that you have in your brain." He grinned, partly at her use of the word love, partly at the way she said it, wearily, and he felt like playing it cool, but could not help himself. He said, "I love you, too," and then, trying to be very businesslike, "I think that's what we're supposed to say. I don't know." She let him stay lonely for a minute, looking upward, she said, "I am going to assume I won't hear that 'good-bye' nonsense from you ever again." Then she snapped the play script up from the dashboard, got out, and walked erect, a queen, to her big, lighted house.

No no no no no no no, Morissa roared at herself, long after the night table light was off.

Self-destructive urges, harmless to others, are one thing. Letting—but, ungrateful sweet, dumb boy to think he's [illegible] a bonanza, allowing Stalion to see he is very much something else.

[illegible] *I'll* see [illegible] Then we are by the [illegible] looking for the Grand Society [illegible] with his coloring book.

[illegible] I've got to bring this down from the level he's putting it on, the one I've tightly, mindedly established. It won't happen again—not now, hopefully never, surely not, when the next baying is heard at the full moon and I am running. But he's got to know, as quickly as I can make him know, that what we have is not cosmic [illegible] but a kick, balling, a roll in the hay.

How do you put that to something so young and serious and appropriately naive, o kinky wizardress?

By not putting it to him at all. By abruptly erasing him. Sure.

Then how about instituting the old reliable West Coast game of Orgy Porgy, the safety in numbers game, so many flanks flying at once that whatchacallit, love, becomes conveniently irrelevant?

Yes. That's how. Sadly, goddammit, yes.

At the Cameron Public Library the following day, Flip checked the most recent annual edition of *Reader's Guide* for articles on Monica Spencer. There were only six magazine pieces about her in the past year (as opposed to twenty-seven three years before, he counted), but Miss Herlands brought him the six magazines he asked for along with a fat folder containing newspaper and magazine clippings, some of them yellowed, from the library's drama department.

Facts disagreed. Her age, as of this day, was forty-five, forty-seven, and fifty. She had been born in Nova Scotia and New York City and Holcourt, Florida, and Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and Stranraer, Scotland. She had attended college and she had not attended college. Those who worked with her insisted she was the friendliest, most cooperative and most considerate actress who had ever drawn breath and she was the most cutting, hysterical, undisciplined and evil female who'd ever drawn breath.

Facts agreed. She was the only Hollywood star ever to have won three Oscars in leading roles. Among critics and the movie industry in general there was unanimous agreement that she was not only a classic beauty but a consummate actress who could play, and had played, everything from low comedy to sophisticated drama to high tragedy, all without flaw. She answered charges that she drank a lot, caroused a lot, and indulged in scandalous love affairs on both Coasts and in Britain and through most of the Continent by blithely, cheerfully denying nothing. She was extravagant. She always had time to speak out loudly and often effectively for social causes, popular and unpopular, that touched and moved her. She had married three times, never for long. The husbands' names, except for Alan Thayer the actor, meant nothing to Flip.

There were dozens of pictures of her, publicity shots, movie stills, newspaper and magazine pictures, most of them happy and lively ones, here and there a pensive one,

different hairstyles and different dress fashions for different periods, every picture leaping up and out to pocket that [illegible] Spencer was paying, and fourth [illegible] Pyramids. One picture that caught his eye, one he kept returning to, showed Lyndon on the White House lawn, with grinning cupcakes at her side and behind her, the President of the United States grinning at her, too, as she held the nozzle of a garden hose, her mouth only inches above the running water. The caption said that the Washington temperature that day was high in the nineties. When he was reasonably sure that no one in the reading room was looking, Flip slipped the picture into his pocket.

He delivered the Saturday order to Fort Dark Forest, half expecting that she would not be there to receive it. She was, he certainly was not any more on time than he was, and even several minutes after the hour struck, both of them were late, considering the [illegible] in her work. She was [illegible] and [illegible] and [illegible] and

love, and she mentioned it again afterward. "I'd like that. Everyone would like that."

Hurt and worried and angry because he finally realized that she was serious, he objected, "Well, here's someone who wouldn't like it: Me." He looked at her and said firmly, "The answer is no."

"What a strange answer."

"The question's what's strange. What kind of a dishrag do you take me for, that I'd . . ." *Careful,* he told himself—"*share* you with anybody?"

She smiled. The smile seemed condescending, and that hurt all the more. "My word. Lord Byron has become Archbishop Byron. You *are* a prig."

"What?"

"No, darling, *prig,*" she said, leaving him to cross the bedroom for her robe. "I had no clue my beautiful friend could be such a sobersides by choice." Before Flip could respond, she returned with the robe over her arm and sat close beside him. "Let's not quarrel, darling," she said. "Let's not burrow a simple thing like this into the ground. What you and I have is very, very good, but not enough for me. Not because of any fault on your part, but because nothing is ever entirely enough for me. If you want me, you'll have to understand and accept that. I'm a restless girl who likes new and different experiences at different times. It's all really quite uncomplicated, don't you see?"

Then she was kissing him, and Flip knew that what she was saying was, *Obey me or you won't be coming back.*

He wouldn't be able to bear that.

3

Georgia Twardesky went to confession at St. Agnes' and she lied to Father Bartholomew, as she had always lied to him. In the past week, she confessed to the old, old, wheezing priest who had those teeth with the castanet sounds, that she had smoked cigarettes and told her father she hadn't. She had let a boy kiss her and rest his hand on her knee. She had thought impure thoughts. Father said, "Go and sin no more, my child," and she left him and spoke a Hail Mary and an Our Father and escaped from the church and took off her kerchief.

She caught the Cranberry Lane bus that rode her to

within a quarter mile of home. She sat near the front, in the seat where the evening driver, Spunky could have [illegible] Spunky was doing [illegible] Normal as cranberry pie.

[illegible] it so she could tell it to Tommy, Tom.

[illegible] sinned and sinned.

What happens in Hell? Hell is where you go, where you go to Hell, depending on your point of view. Eternity. Forever. It never ends. They put you in a [illegible] and you're [illegible] and you're burning, but you don't [illegible] and you're burning, but you don't ever die because you've already died, and you have your choice to be good and you're dead, you're dead on earth and on forever and ever, without a second's letup.

Maybe in Purgatory, they don't really pay a whole lot of attention, mean it, maybe the Blessed Virgin will —

[illegible] the Blessed Virgin?

[illegible] trucks than usual parked [illegible] the [illegible] to her house. That could [illegible] the world [illegible] help the [illegible] Mary, with [illegible] work the Sticky [illegible] hurried [illegible] to her apartment over the [illegible] Antoinette called up to her, "Hey, George, [illegible] Chatterton and lend a hand." George [illegible] Sticky, and changed into [illegible] and went downstairs, [illegible] with the always present stein of beer.

[illegible] of the regular delivery trade were there [illegible] and Jerry Lind, and a couple of their helpers [illegible] name. She said hello to them, though purposely without sparkle because her father, who never missed a trick even when he was [illegible] deep in doing orders, was in

back of the bar, and he didn't like her sparkling for anybody in pants. The foundry workers and the truck drivers at one end of the long bar and in the booths were eating or waiting to be fed. A too-loud polka, the kind of music that made her head hurt, was on the juke. On a ledge above the row of bottles was a framed dollar bill, a string of little American flags, and two printed signs, *God Bless America* and *USA—IF YOU'RE HEART'S NOT IN IT GET YOUR A-- OUT OF IT*. On one side of the cash register was a picture of Jesus Christ. On the other side was the old color calendar picture of Marilyn Monroe in the raw. Georgia's father, Big Stan Twardesky, gassing with some of the customers, looked a tiny bit like Steve McQueen. Steve McQueen was old and bald-headed and had a stick-out gut. He motioned for her to hustle into the kitchen.

The day's specialty was pork chops and home fries. Marie—forty, at least, with straw-yellow hair and heavy legs and heavy headlights and scuffed, white flat shoes—told her who was to get what, and said, "Don't look so sour, your highness. A little work's not gonna kill you."

"You know what you can do," Georgia said.

One of the men at the bar was Flip Byron's father. He wasn't one of the regulars, but he did stop in for a beer or two once or twice a week after he closed up his market, and sometimes when he was in a showoff mood he bought beer for the house, and those couple of bucks he laid out made him a big wheel. Tonight he was in a white shirt, with the collar open and the sleeves rolled up over strong, freckled arms, and he was loudly buying a round for the house because, Georgia heard, "My oldest boy just went overseas in the service of the greatest country on earth. He *wanted* to go, couldn't wait, and my middle boy's rarin' to go, too, when he's called, not like some of these yella belly young punks. They didn't work like we did, right? They're too good to fight for their country because they're too busy tearing it down. Hell, *I* wasn't too good, too proud to fight, right? And I'd be tickled to death to do it again. Matt, you did your part for Uncle Sam, right?"

"I sure's hell did, Fred," said the man next to him, "Smack at Normandy."

"And Stan, you were over there too, right?"

"Right," nodded Georgia's father. The creep liar, she thought. The big hero, Stanley Twardesky, got himself a cozy hernia, spelled 4-F, and spent the war in a defense plant; why did he have to lie? She moved in and out of the

kitchen with orders. The tune was done with the polka crisp for a while, and an old song went on, and Tip's big-mouth father went to the bottle and poured on his second beer. The other men were singing, and pretending not to, he certainly knew, all the words and the tune:

> Kiss me once and kiss me twice
> And kiss me once again
> It's been a long, long time
> Haven't felt like this before
> In can't remember when
> It's been a long, long ti—ii—me . . .

and one guy was hollering "Take it to the IV, Fred," and Tip's father was pounding, and Tip was watching him. Fred was a funny bastard and he sang with them and slapped backs.

[illegible] he was talking [illegible] with the strength [illegible] that could [illegible] a big old-fashioned [illegible] with a nail in what they used, then in all fun, right."

George's face went pale. "I fought with the Irish, dere, I did," he whined and looked around to avoid George, who was [illegible] she didn't hear.

[illegible] "Oh, I could [illegible] Fred, though he probably [illegible] the beer. I wanna [illegible] and [illegible] Because [illegible] and there's [illegible] I drink more'n I should, but I can get right just smellin' the [illegible]. I don't have any daughters, but if I did I'd bust a man in the mouth if I heard him use foul language so she could hear."

"It's okay. No harm done," she said, and smiled.

He held her arm and wouldn't let go, and frowned. "It's *not* okay. I wouldn't hurt a soul, let alone a nice pretty girlie like you. Listen . . ."

Her father, who didn't like anybody's hands on her,

lumbered to them. "You pay up and head on home," he ordered. "First, take your hand off of her."

"Wha—aat?"

"You heard me Vanoose, and don't bother to come back here till you can mind how you talk and how to keep your mitts to yourself." Everybody was watching. Everybody. Georgia set the empty plates in the kitchen and raced upstairs, trembling with humiliation and anger. Barely a minute passed before her father came up after her, and shut the door at the top of the stairs, and said, "I see you. Wigglin' your can around, leadin' that old man on. The second he put his dirty paws on you, you shoulda run. I'm warnin' you: one more time—"

Georgia exploded. "One more time *what?* I'm sick of this one more time shit! You can go straight to hell, where you belong! Go screw that wop waitress you got down there and leave me be, always accusin' me, always treatin' me like filth, why don't you —"

He ripped off his belt and hit her backside with it. "There's no language like that in this house, you slut tramp whore like your mother."

He hit her again. "Don' choo ever tell *me* to go to hell, you scum wildcat like your mother."

And again. "I'll bust your throat, you ever talk snot-talk to me again, you hear, you mick whore like your mother."

He put his belt back on and shut the top stair door after him.

That night, Georgia didn't bawl. The belt still hurt, but she was done with bawling.

You'll meet Tom soon enough, you pig sonofabitch, she told her father.

And thought of Tom, and thought of Hell, and thought of Tom.

Okay, where *was* Tom? Why hadn't he called up like he'd said he would?

He would, she assured herself, and stopped thinking about Hell.

4

Fred Byron, Senior, yanked the bed covers from his wife's body and saw it alarmed in the darkness. She pulled the sheet over her. This enraged him, and he tore it away.

fire against broomstraw.

5

care, preferably hospital care.

hospital. There they can—"

me so *worried?*"

than this nowhere town."

"Saturdays are always the best money days," she said

"But don't . . . you know . . . don't kill him, honey. I mean, not unless you have to . . ."

"What if I do?"

". . . Then you know what's best. Oh, hug me tight, man, I'm kind of scared."

On Saturday evening, alone, Tom packed only essential belongings into his canvas sack because he'd never dug traveling an ounce heavier than necessary, and slung his guitar over his back and split the city he didn't want, that didn't want him. On a local train heading for Cameron, Connecticut, his mind crusty with patches of memory, he looked back . . .

His first clear recollection was when he was seven years old and riding near the front of a bus, between his pretty mama, who smelled of sweat and perfume and who cradled his head against her big, soft chest and softly sang, "Ain't no nigger gonna touch my baby, ain't no nigger gonna touch my baby," and a man he had been told to call Uncle Cal and who smoked a skinny, smelly cigar and kept looking through the bus window.

Tom's mother held him and slowly rubbed the side of his thigh, up and down, up and down, with her hand, as she sang, and she said, "Sweet lamb, you're just gonna be *crazy* about our cousins. They got a whole bunch of kiddies just your age, all with toys and ready to play with you the whole livelong day, and there's soda pop, and there's peppermint sticks, and there's nigger baby licorice, all you want, and two minutes after Uncle Cal and me leave, you'll be so busy havin' *fun* and openin' all your *presents* with the big red ribbons and the paper stars, somebody'll remark my name and you'll up and you'll say, 'Now who's she?'"

Uncle Cal was mad. "Christ sake, Mildred, don't fill his head with all that dreamy stuff."

"You just go settle your feathers," his mama said. "There's gonna be *soda* pop, any ol' flavor strikes your fancy, and lots o' li'l friends to *play* with, and tutti frutti *ice* cream and . . ."

The little farm belonged to an old man and old lady named Mr. and Mrs. Purdy, and before Tom could finish looking around for the children, and the soda pop, and the presents, his mama and the man he had been told to call Uncle Cal were gone. His mama didn't even say goodbye.

Mrs. Purdy wasn't a mean lady—at least she smiled and told him he was a nice boy. She showed the frightened

Tom where he would sleep, a sixty roof room, up lots of dark stairs and down a long dark hall, and said, "No sonny, we don't have any young'uns here but you. You just mind your manners and do like you're supposed to and don't scare Mr. Purdy, and we'll all get on just fine and dandy."

Except for the saying of grace, no one spoke at supper. The big, squeaky, lonely bed and the bedroom's darkness petrified Tom, and he lay still and could not sleep that night, but he must have slept some for he was startled awake by cracks of thunder and the flash of lightning striking past his window. He yelled "Mama, Mama!" and was about to get out of bed and run to her, crying, but Mr. Purdy was there, his arms full over his head and he was not crying, and he scowled and told him to be quiet. Then he heard feet and cursing and Mr. Purdy opening the door and standing in the hall. Tom could see him from the waist down. He was cursing, and Tom looked up to the mouth starin' in right now. Do you hear me, boy? What's the matter with you? Can't you shut your head? What's gotten into you? Now you just shut up, 'specially if I got to put up with your hootin' and a-hollerin'. You hear me now, boy? I don't hear one more peep outta you, I gonna take your peter and chop it right off. You start in learnin' how to be a man!" Then Mr Purdy turned the light out, and went out of the room, and Tom heard the bedroom door being locked from the outside, and heard more thunder.

On Saturdays Mr. Purdy would drive his truck into town and Tom would look forward to Saturdays because he could follow Mrs. Purdy around and help her with chores and pretend she was his mother. Saturdays at dusk they went to the movies and Tom would sometimes fall asleep, but the movies were pretty good. One night, he lay in the bathtub and had his head under the water and the faucet was open. Mr. Purdy came in to scrub his head. She saw what he was doing and pulled his head under the water and kept it there although he thrashed every which way to be able to breathe. When she allowed him to breathe, she said that she hoped he'd learned his lesson.

School was two miles from the farm. The month was November, and the nine children in the one room school house knew one another and only the girls were ready to welcome him. He found that he had to go wee-wee almost

all the time, was mortified by the times he couldn't hold it and had to do it in his pants. He was a bright student, nonetheless—he read better than any of the other kids, even the girls, and he could do figures—and the more his teacher, Miss Sloane, praised him in class, the more enemies he made among the boys. He ached for the boys to accept him and like him. By Christmas, he was beaten up nineteen times, by boys in pairs and gangs.

From the Purdys Tom was sent to the Morelands, and then the Cades, and then the Hortons. Eleven homes in all not counting the orphanage (see Lonesome), not counting the few days at a time, once for two full weeks, when his pretty mama would call for him and keep him with her and feed him candy bars and Kentucky Fried Chicken and keep him warm beside her in bed and keep assuring, "I won't never let you go away from me ever again, Tommy Sweet Lamb." Then she would get bad-drunk, or just reckless, or one of the uncles she was living with would complain about him being in the way, and he would be taken to the next strangers.

Most of the homes were the same, neither cruel nor loving. His favorite was the Colliacos in Amarillo, because old Dominic, the janitor with the wild mustache and the black-gloved hand and hard cigarette cough, took his part and treated him like one of the big Italian family, even if Mrs. Colliaco didn't. But something terrible happened at the Colliacos': Tom began to steal things from the house, things he didn't need, coins, small tools, salt cellars, the Pluto dog—something terrible he could not understand because this was the first home that felt like a home. Old Dominic's objections, Mrs. Colliaco called the social worker to come get him when she opened Tom's drawer and found nearly all the items she had lately been missing, including her dear grandmother's gold crucifix.

Before the social worker could come, Tom ran; he was fourteen now, wiry and tough, and he was through with being led from no-homes to no-homes. He ran from Texas to New Mexico and back to Texas, to Oklahoma, to Kansas, stealing his food, sleeping where he could. He hated and feared sleep because it made him helpless, because giving in to it always forced an oppressive ritual first. It was necessary always to be very still and not make a sound or move a muscle because soon *she* would appear. She would come every night, no matter where he was, and hover over

him for a while and then, finally, creep away with awful slowness. He would draw his breath in and think, I'll have to hold it until I can't stay more, and lie here on my back, still and stiff, if she thinks I'm already dead, she won't bend down and breathe deep into me. He could sense her presence close to him, a scrawny and sharp-eyed old woman with a shawl over her head and gray wisps of hair around her bony, yellow face.

There were the two- and three-day dishwasher jobs, and always the worry that some cop would show up demanding identification. The shyness, the fright and hurt of homelessness would not let go, but somewhere along the drifting line, by working very hard, Tom developed a personality that proclaimed assurance and good will toward all men. When he was fifteen, and looked eighteen, he rolled a drunk sailor one night in Selma, and found that the uniform fit him. With the thirty dollars that were in the sailor's wallet, he went to a saloon, where he drank his first beer, and where a lady who was about his mother's age and who even looked a little like his mother smiled at him and offered to buy the Navy a drink. He ordered a bourbon, which tasted awful, and after he and the lady whose name was Brenda had talked for a while, they walked to her small, neat apartment where he insulted her by asking, "How much?" She was lonely, not a hooker, she fumed, and soon she was persuaded that he hadn't meant anything bad.

As they undressed, Tom realized that he was about to try sex for the same reason he had tried beer and whiskey: mild curiosity and nothing more, he felt no excitement, no nervousness. He kissed Brenda and played her for a very long time, with experienced hands and mouth and body, magically, as if he had been born and lived once before, as if he had been all of history's great lovers combined. Brenda was a strapping, panting lady (it wasn't an act, he was positive) and mighty passionate—were all women this passionate and crazy, did his mother carry on like this—and she exclaimed, "Where'd you go to school to learn so much, sailor boy? You're terrific!" He would not tell her he hadn't let himself have an orgasm, wouldn't tell her he knew that orgasms sapped men's strength and left them weak and helpless. But he enjoyed being enjoyed, and he answered, "I know everything. About everything."

Because she invited him, and because he had nowhere special to go, Tom moved in for what he called his thirty-

day leave. Brenda lived on alimony and as a waitress, and she swore to Tom one middle of the night that he was not in the habit of picking up men. While she was at work, he spent hours of each day in the public library, drawn to the shelves and shelves of books that took him to worlds where strong men fought nobly to protect their ladies fair, drawn to every book's guarantee that it would teach him everything—about everything. Brenda revolted him, the woman fatness and the unrefined passion of her revolted him. But he stayed because there was food and a bed and none of the "No, you mustn't" pressures and restrictions he'd heard in all the no-home homes. And he stayed because there was much that he was learning. There were so many ways in sex to be in control of her—in you any woman, every woman; why not—to cheapen and to punish. When he first suggested some of the wild things they could do to each other, she believed that they would make her sick because they were so filthy and depraved. She came around. She had to get drunk, but before long, she was coming up with ideas of her own that proved she was, as all women could be, dirt.

Then there was the morning after she left for work and he rose from bed to pee, when he noticed a strange discharge. When he saw it again the next morning, he said nothing to Brenda but dressed in his slacks and a T-shirt and went to the hospital's free clinic. The results came back the following day. Gonorrhea. Not an advanced case, the doctor said, but a case, you didn't get this from any toilet seat. Here's a prescription for some antibiotic, but I want to see you again . . .

Unclean, impure, defiled, humiliated, Tom stormed to the apartment, phoned Brenda at the restaurant and ordered her to come home, and threw everything of his that had or might have value into the larger of his two suitcases. When she pulled in, concerned by his urgency, he showed her the tube of ointment he'd bought at the pharmacy with the doctor's prescription. "What do you figure this is?" he asked coldly.

"How would I know? Hon, what's the matter—"

"This is what people take that have the clap, you dirty bitch!" he cried and punched her until she bled. Her head made a heavy cracking sound as it hit the wall, and she slid to the floor, and Tom carried the suitcase out of her apartment and out of Salina.

Four days later, in Hays, a man behind a liquor store counter pressed a button that made a ferocious racket, the instant he saw Tom's knife. Outraged, Tom drove the knife into the man's chest and then, because the alarm wouldn't let up, ran into the street without touching the cash register. He ran until he heard, "Police! Stop or I'll shoot!"

Midway through Tom's court hearing, the word came that the liquor store man would live, after all, and the public defender sighed, "You're a lucky young bastard." Tom was sentenced to Herbertsville. A guy his age he'd met in the wait tank had confided, "If they give you a conviction, I hope for your sake you don't draw Herbertsville. I did some time there and it's bad, bad news. They got screws there that love to kick you shitless."

The reformatory was going to be endurable because Tom chose early that he would be not at all like the scared new fish who were sent there with him; he would adjust himself to each situation on its own terms, and he would keep his ears open and maybe learn things. He was advised to be nice to Jackie, especially if Jackie wanted him as a sweetheart: Jackie was seventeen, an old fish who ran the kids at Herbertsville, and, Tom was warned, a rough target to cross. Jackie did pick Tom. Tom nodded. The moment they were alone behind the laundry room, he kneed Jackie in the groin with all his force and directed, "Let's understand each other quick, buddy. I'm new but I'm a leader, not a follower. You leave me alone and tell your fish to do the same." In Tom's second week at Herbertsville, a husky guard named Mueller gave him a choice that went, in effect, "Be my female when I arrange it, and I'll see you get extra privileges. Say no, and I'll see that your stretch here seems like a lifetime." Tom complied. Not only was Mueller in his corner from then on, but the other screws gave him no sweat, either.

The gonorrhea he had cured with ointment had not been cured. His doctor, a slight, expressionless Cuban named Rodriguez, took a liking to him during the treatments, maybe because Tom asked him interested and intelligent questions each time they met, not only about the clap and the workings of the bloodstream, but about medicine and being a doctor in general. "That's what I'd like to be: a doctor," Tom told him. "To heal people: I don't guess there's anything better or more important than that. How hard would it be for me, do you think—what with having a record, I mean?"

"If you keep your nose clean when you leave here, and go for an education, and really apply yourself, the record alone won't hold you back. You're a smart boy. Any time you're free and you feel like talking about anything, and I'm free, let me know and I'll be here."

But suddenly Dr. Rodriguez wasn't. One day he was a listener and teacher and friend, and a few days later he was gone from Huntsville for good, without a word to Tom. Tom learned that he'd accepted a post somewhere else. He was replaced by a timid, cranky old man named Dearborn who didn't like anyone, let alone prison inmates.

By the time Muellar, the guard, left Huntsville—either deserted or fired—no one could find cause for particularly cared. Tom was securely entrenched: Jackie was sprung, and Tom was running Jackie's fish and all the continually new fish who needed running, in and out of the block. He did not threaten or terrorize, except when it was absolutely necessary, but there was a clear understanding that the fish were to do him favors and never tangle with him. Because he kept them in line and the guards' work lighter, the guards allowed him most of the leverage he wanted.

At sixteen, he understood leadership completely.

In his twentieth month at Huntsville, seven weeks before he was to be released, he got the first letter he had ever received. It was from his mother.

Tracking him down had not been easy, she wrote in a fifth grader's hand. She was sorry he was in the penitentiary and sorry she couldn't have been a better mama, but that was all water over the dam, wasn't it? She was sick very, very sick, with took-something, the doctor called it, something about her blood, and in a couple of years she wouldn't be around to see old Perdido any longer. She was living in Wetherford, all by herself, and some days were very, very bad. When he got out of the jailhouse, would he come and take care of her?

He turned to the library's medical dictionary, the book he had borrowed steadily, and much of which he had almost memorized. The blood disease was leukemia, and it could be chronic as well as acute. But it couldn't be cured.

Spring, he hitched rides for part of the way, and rode the rest of the way to Wetherford by train with the money he'd earned at Huntsville. He stopped to buy three dollars' worth of flowers—"The best you have for three dollars," he instructed the lady florist—and hastened the bouquet to 22 Torrance Street, a slummy rooming house in a slummy part of town. His mama was still pretty, paddy-boozy pretty, and

a million years older than when he'd seen her last. She was half sprawled in an overstuffed leopard-skin chair, cradling a dripped glass to her bosom as possessively as she used to cradle her head, and she had on a faded pink slip, the left strap down over her blotchy white arm so that her fat left breast was nearly out, and her belly was big, and the slip was so thin that he could see the indentation of her belly button, and the dark, cheesy recesses of beer and never-a-gallon perfume. An old man in nothing more than wrinkled gray shorts lay on the sofa, an ugly old man with sprays of white hair on his chest and none on his legs, eyes shut and mouth open, dead except for the gargling snores. Her mama seemed to be trying to squint her way through a telephone book. She hadn't heard him knock at the door, nor had she noticed him come in. A cheap green electric fan was whirring, and he had to go close to her, and touch her and say, "Mama . . ." almost as a question, before she looked up.

She did, and blinked, and her smile was bright: some of her teeth were gone but my, how bright that smile was! She dropped the phone book and sat up quickly and worked to bring the hem of her slip down over her white, veiny, flabby, Brendan-like thighs, and her arms shot up and she clucked, "Tommy, sweet lamb, my Tommy boy's come home!" Tom sank to his knees and embraced her, and let her kiss him, and reveled in the love, the love, the love. "Ah now, you did get my dumb old letter," she exclaimed. "You did come home to take care of Mildred. Oh, you sweet baby lamb! And flowers! For me, flowers! Ah . . . oh, you always was a sweet lamb, Tommy."

"What does the doctor say, Mama?"

She blinked again. "Doctor? 'bout what?"

"Your sickness you wrote me about."

Doctor. Pass on the doctor, you know? Sam and me run clean outta money, so that Europe doctor, he says where I ought to go to the charity ward. You ever heard such a thing? Me? I'm a Montgomery! Pass. Pss, on the Europe doctor, all the doctors. Ah you're lookin' just swell, sweet lamb. But what'm I supposed to do with these nice flowers, drink 'em? I was hoping you'd'a brought some, you know, a bottle. Go on down to the corner to Rice's and buy us a bottle of anything, rum, rye, don't matter, will you like a sweet lamb? We'd all of us celebrate you coming home from the Army to take care of your sick mama." Hardly with a pause, she went on. "How do I look, Tommy? Not

too bad for an old firehorse, yuh?" She sat up stiffly and proudly as she cackled, and he could see her brown walnut nipples straining through the slip. "Well, what's the verdict, judge? A couple good hot lovin's left in me yet, right? Go get us a fifth bottle, and we'll wake up your Uncle Sam over there—" she chortled "—Uncle Sam, just like in the flag . . . Uncle Sam . . . and we'll all have a cozy drink, okey dokey?"

"Yes."

Outside, Tom walked past the liquor store. On the next block he found a hardware store, bought yarn, a box of nails, a carving knife, a paint brush, and a collapsible cup, and paid for them all. On the way back, he dumped everything but the carving knife into a trash can. When he entered the room again, his mother, the stranger who always tricked him, was squinting at the telephone book, and the old man hadn't moved. Tom killed his mother with the knife, the handle of which he held in his handkerchief. She was dead fast, but he ripped the pink slip from her fat body and dashed at her great rolling breasts again and again. He put the knife into the sleeping old man's hands—both hands, in case the old man was left-handed—and retrieved it with his handkerchief and let it fall to the carpet. Then he used the handkerchief to wipe his forehead and, averting his eyes, left the rooming house and Wetherford.

He was seventeen years old, and he challenged the cops who were nowhere in sight, and everyone, "Come and get me. Try."

Tom checked his guitar and canvas bag in a locker at the Cameron train station—Georgia could collect them later—and traveled to the Five Points Road by foot, rather than invite some yokel cab driver to identify him, a day or a week from that night. He'd memorized Georgia's directions. She had assured him that the trip was only a mile; it turned out to be more like two, and the darkness burned him. Still, the schedule was working like a charm; there, finally, was *Stan's Bar & Grille*, the last house on the road as promised, the sign still lit up. There was one car at the side of the saloon, an ancient De Soto. The road wasn't shining. Except for a light on in the first floor of one shabby house and an upstairs light on in another—both houses a safe enough distance from the saloon—the road was deserted, asleep, dead. Twelve o'clock. Real Saturday night swingers.

A man and a lady came out of the saloon, arguing with the volume up like two disgusting tourists, and drove away in the De Soto. Tom strolled toward the door, as a late customer if necessary, but stopped to peer through the grimy glass. At first he saw no one at all, and he froze, half expecting some kind of trap, some trick; but then he saw that the back booth, at the end of the bar, was occupied. He couldn't see much more than the top of a head and some movement of hands, and he realized soon that the hands were shuffling paper and coins.

Georgia hadn't remembered that her old man counted his money in a half-hidden booth. That was to be it. Tom waited, making sure no one else was there, out of his range of vision. No movement. At last he turned the knob and eased open the door, tensed for the jangle of a bell and ready to flash a smile and a persuasive plea for one short beer before closing.

The door was soundless. He eased in and closed it softly. Then, sidestepping sweating, he walked along the bar toward the booth where the old head bobbed and the big hands shuffled money. His boots made no sound and he held his breath, sure the slightest stir would rend the awful silence.

At the end of the bar several dirty beer mugs stood on a gummy paddle. He picked up one by the handle and then, covering the last six feet in a lunge, he crashed the mug down on the big head before it could finish turning, before that face—Georgia's, a big male Georgia's—could register expression.

The mug struck Twardesky at the temple and tore the flesh from his cheekbone, but oddly the glass didn't break. Tom stepped back, expecting for a moment that the man would cry out or leap up, but he just sat there, blood spurting from his cheek and ear, his eyes staring past Tom, unseeing. Quickly Tom smashed the mug down again, and then again, and this time it broke and shards of glass gouged and more blood spurted, almost reaching, almost touching Tom. The man sank back against the wall, his face bubbling in blood.

Tom hurriedly stuffed bills into his pockets, watching the door for movement and glancing at the mess slumped in the booth: a neat purple tattoo on the man's upper left arm read *Cooky 1944*. Twardesky's breathing gurgled and wheezed, but he was obviously unconscious, probably near death. Tom thought of finishing him, but he would have to go get another mug, and anyway he was sure the man

hadn't seen anything, hadn't known who or what hit him. He stuffed the last of the bills into his pockets and ran for the kitchen and the stairs to the pad above, where Georgia should have already called the cops about suspicious noises below.

She was waiting at the top of the stairs. Her eyes were crazy scared and she was panting as if she had just been barfed. "Is he dead?" she whispered. "O God, did you . . . ?"

"Shut up. You call the fuzz?"

She clung to him, nodding hard, her nails digging in. "Tell me. Tell me!"

"How do I get to the attic?"

"My father . . . Tell me . . ."

The screech of a siren, chuck rushing down a blackboard snapped her out of it. The siren sounded smack on top of them; the bastards must have been around the corner when the call went in. She looked wildly about and pointed toward a door at the end of the hall. He raced for it and was halfway through when he heard the pounding on the downstairs door begin.

Georgia was terrified when she let the two cops in, and all during her prearranged story she was sure they saw through her. She told of the funny noises, pointed her finger and said she was afraid to go in *there*, begged them to find out why her father didn't answer when she called down to him. One cop stayed with her while the other went into the bar because she said she was scared to be by herself, and she kept twitching her face into different expressions, certain each one was wrong and would give her away.

The cop came back and whispered to the other one. They looked at her, and she was sure they knew. As one of them picked up the phone, the other said to her, "There's been an accident in there, miss. My partner's calling an ambulance, but maybe you'd better come in with me and see if you can help."

Numbly she let him guide her into the bar and to the back booth where someone sat. As he got nearer she saw blood all over the face, nearly covering it, even over the eyes. *He's done it*, she thought. *Tom's killed him.* She knew she should cry or scream or at least seem sad, but as she stared at the mess of a face she simply felt nothing and could not make her muscles move.

I've got to make myself scream, she thought, and at that instant a great blob of blood twitched and one huge wild

blue eye looked directly at her from the mangled face, and she screamed, and kept screaming, and could not stop, even when the cop with the gentle hand led her away.

Chapter 5

1

Chester Olds remained missing.

The trial against Lewis Brown, Barry Norris Dwiggins, and Chester Clement Olds was postponed. If Olds was not apprehended within a reasonable time, Superior Court ruled, the case against him would be severed and Brown and Dwiggins would be tried without him.

When Lewis and the counselor he had retained, Harold Archer, met for lunch at the Cimarron Country Club, Archer acknowledged before the drinks came. "You've a new bad game, Warren," Archer acknowledged before the drinks came. "Your kid gets busted while in the act of purchasing heroin, presumably for the purpose of resale. The witnesses are some cops who saw the transaction and identified your kid. The court implies leniency for your kid if he cooperates and sings. He's polite, but he says no dice. The judge in Superior Court'll likely be either Dan Mathieu or 'Porky' Porter, and both of them are fire-breathing hangers when it comes to drug traffic. The prosecutor will be Noel Ingram, an old friend of mine whose tail I beat off every time we golf together, a nice guy but a cobra in the courtroom, a very careful one, a very, very effective one. The jury I'm up against will be no better and no worse, no smarter and no dumber than any other jury, twelve taxpayers who'll get the hots from Ingram's brilliant theories, and who'll keep automatically associating your kid with Lewis Brown and Brown's lawyer—a lawyer who's so transparently shabby and stupid and ten thumbs that they'll be only too ready to hang when the judge hints at it.

"Okay. We still had a chance to get your kid off, even with all those formidable stumbling blocks. He was in that bowling alley parking lot that night with Brown and Olds, but that alone doesn't prove he's a peddler. We could've used first offense. We could've used adolescent prank or misguided

judgment, a good boy from a good home, and go and sin no more."

"Well, no prank, Warren," Archer said, and told Dwiggins that a local girl named Jill Backston was ready to testify she'd seen his kid sell heroin to Dorothy Jean Donlin.

Bucks fell on Warren Dwiggins and for a moment left him speechless. "This will destroy Barry's mother," he responded gravely. "Helen's told herself so many times it was a frameup, or *some* sort of explainable misunderstanding, she's come to believe it." He stared through the restaurant's window, onto the fairways. "I guess I have, too," he added softly.

The waiter brought two highballs and left. "Then come out of Neverland, Warren," said Archer. "If the Backston kid's testimony sufficiently impresses that jury, and if Ingram introduces other witnesses and facts that *I'm* not prepared for—if I have to go into that courtroom with a hand tied behind me, then you and Helen had better resign yourselves to a whale of a lot more grief. I haven't been able to crack Barry. You say you and Helen can't. I have only so many rabbits in my hat."

Dwiggins thought. "Barry's been going to a psychotherapist or analyst, or whatever you call them, for about a year," he said. "A woman, a Mrs.—I forget her name, but I can get it. I was against it from the start—still am, it's all a load of molly-coddling as far as I'm concerned—but Helen kept claiming he needed psychological help."

"Why haven't you told me this before?"

"Shame, probably."

"Shame?"

"I worked my way up the ladder without going in for that voodoo stuff. So did everybody else I know. Barry seeing someone like that . . . well, it always seemed to me that that's admitting weakness, in spades. But maybe he talks to this woman . . ."

Fran courteously heard Harold Archer out, but explained she could furnish nothing without Barry's consent.

"Come now, Mrs. Townes," the lawyer chided. "Privileged information is sacred between attorneys and clients, doctors and patients, and clergy and parishoners. What's your professional background that entitles you to be uncooperative?"

"This agency's control analyst is Dr. Aram Boormazian, a psychiatrist, Mr. Archer. He reads my records and I consult

with him once a week. You have the right, of course, to talk with him."

"I'm not out to put young Dwiggins behind bars, Mrs. Townes. My job is to defend him, to give him the best defense possible. He's not cooperating, and cooperation is something I could use a great deal more of."

"I appreciate that. Barry's next session with me is tomorrow. I'll discuss the situation with him. But I have to repeat: I have no right to violate his confidences. Good day, Mr. Archer."

"I'll have a chat with Dr. . . . Borzanian, did you say?"

"Boornazian. By all means, do."

"The Buckston girl's testimony could be extremely damaging, Barry," Fran warned. "My understanding is that she doesn't know Chester Olds, but she does know you. She's ready to say she saw you hand a paper bag to Dorothy Donlin, and that Dorothy opened the bag and showed her some heroin."

"Well, it didn't happen," Barry snorted, nervously playing with his gleaming cigarette lighter. "It's like I said: her dealer was Chet Olds."

"Then why haven't you told your lawyer that? Why haven't you told him anything?"

"Maybe I will, some day. Like, don't bug me, Mrs. Townes, all right?"

"What *is* this—stubbornness, or fear?"

"Nothing. I never heard of any Jill Buckston. Look, everything'll come out okay. I overheard my parents having a heavy head rap last night. My father said that if it comes down to the wire, he'll buy Jill Buckston's old man off. No sweat. My Dad's a mover and shaker when he puts his mind to it. Gold still talks."

At her suggestion, Fran and Charlie took his lovely Nancy to dinner. The evening was strained: Nancy talked—now and then even animatedly, especially with her news that pressure had finally brought the Neanderthal *Sun-Sentinel* around to admit in an editorial that there was indeed a group called The Save Sanderson Mountain Committee and that more and more people in Cameron were taking the saving of the mountain seriously—but the evening's air was distinctly filled with, *You're an intruder. Leave my father alone.*

When Charlie excused himself to chat with a hands waving

couple at another table (conveniently?), Fran volunteered, "I wish we could be friends, Nancy."

"Why?"

"Because I like you. Because I'd like it if you liked me."

"Why?"

Very well, thought Fran; cut through and be rational. "For one reason, your father and I are fond of each other. We enjoy each other's company, and—"

"That's the only reason, then, isn't it? If you can make a pushbutton robot out of me, you're home free. If you don't get all the smooth sailing from me you want, then getting to be Mrs. Charles Forbes just might be a little harder. That's the *only* reason you'd like me to like you. At least be honest."

Bluntness is one thing, Fran thought, obnoxious bluntness is another."

I can't help it if I'm the way I am. I've been brought up [illegible]."

The drive to Belleair [illegible] Nancy said, "Good night, Fran, thanks for dinner," and walked briskly across the lawn and into her house. On the way to Belleair, Charlie remarked, "That meal was a howling success."

"Honestly, Father, Charlie. You and I might have to start thinking in terms of not seeing each other for a while, at any rate."

"Don't be silly."

"I'm not silly. As long as I, or any woman, poses a threat to Nancy, nothing's safe. Losing her mother is still dreadful to her. It's been hardly more than a year, after all. She needs more time. She should have more time."

"How much time? Another year? Ten years? Twenty?"

"You're [illegible] one year's time now. Let's . . . cool it for a [illegible] and let Nancy adjust. Certainly a child can't be allowed to dictate [illegible], but with time the problem will solve itself. Meanwhile, I couldn't be a party to any [illegible] example. She's your daughter, Charlie, and that [illegible] very special, responsible, handling and patience."

At Fran's door, before he left her, Charlie repeated that her suggestion was idiotic. But he did say, "I just hope you realize your magnanimity in sending me away may put me in the arms of some willowy broad who's not as selfless as you."

Fran laughed. "You don't know me well, Mr. Forbes. I go about my selfless business with all the confidence of a

mind reader at a poker game. Let that willowy broad show up I'll skin her—them, all of them, any of them—alive."

Mike hadn't come home yet. Mrs Curtis' door was closed. Fran prepared for bed and thought, *Of course I could be cutting my throat. Of course the woods are full of lurking, willowy broads—prettier, younger, and most of all shrewder -who'd love to be Mrs. Forbes. But I'm right. I think I'm right. Ignoring that needful child is no answer.*

She heard Mike's key in the front door. Her reading light was on, and her bedroom door was open, and Mike's head popped in. "Everything okay, Ma?" he asked.

"Sure How was the dance? How was Ruthanne?"

"Nothing too spectacular, on both counts. Ruthanne Cumberland means well, I suppose, but I can take only so much of her yap-yap-yap about her rich mother, the advertising executive, and her rich father, the architect, and her rich vacations to France and her rich cars and her rich staff of servants and her rich dog and her rich cat."

"Be tolerant, sweetie. The rich need to be reassured, too. Is she definitely going to the Sorbonne this fall?"

"Where else would a Cumberland female go after Miss Barnaby's? Her rich mother, the advertising executive, and her rich grandmother, the rich grandmother, went there, too, Ruthanne happened to mention in passing for about eight hours."

"You're a snob And the worst kind: an un-rich one."

"*Si*, at'sa me. One good thing about old Ruthanne, she doesn't mind slumming with us un-rich snobs; I think it's how she gets her kicks. You know what, Ma? I'm gonna retire early in life I'm gonna marry old Ruthanne for her loot, and spend my days clipping coupons on all my polo ponies in my thousand foot yacht."

"That's fine with me, as long as you remember every year to send your withered, wizened old mother a card at Christmas. Not an expensive one, of course."

"No card's too expensive for you when I marry rich"

"Whew, what a relief All right, fortune hunter, go and have a great night's sleep."

"You, too, Ma. 'Night."

She returned to *Brant's Weekly,* Charlie's magazine, warmed by this son who was turning out so well. There had been worries, genuine worries. Mike had not been well as a baby and child—the continual colds, the rheumatic heart scare, the long-healing broken wrist at seven, the long healing broken leg at ten, the frail body that could never

fight off germs or normal wear and tear with ease. He had come into a fatherless world, and he had been emotionally fragile, often desperately so. He had been cruel and shortsighted. From his self-centered past, one night in a mood of purity and valor, he had admired Hal admired, too, that he'd tried grass and, later, heroin. But once, he'd sworn, only once and absolutely never again, no matter what certain kids said. For a very long period of time, loving and involved, she had been wordly afraid that he was going to drift onto the wrong turn and lose his way, severely and perhaps irredeemably, with drugs, with sexual aberration with some tone-different drummer, with the lyrics. He was safe now, far from her thoughts when she trusted Barry Downes.

But he wasn't Barry Downes. He was Mike Towne, and he had come to accept and even grow with it. He was, sixteen years old, a normal child and normal young man. But essentially, solidly sixteen, with a quick and sure sense of humor, a vehement distaste for cruelty and injustice, a feel for life, an eagerness to wake up the next day, a touching boy with the beginnings of a mature spirit, and man, and person.

From the moment on her porch when she knew he was seeing Charlie, knew he was seeing the friend of Nancy Fortas, whom he'd once described as a pretty nice kid, he was that kind of young man. He'd been Charlie's friend a number of times, and she was certain that he wasn't ashamed, and he had yet to comment on Charlie, pro or con, that he had yet to ask intentions.

She thought about the night with Charlie in her house.

She thought about Nancy living there. And Mike living there.

Sleep wouldn't come.

2

Nancy walked Mop the full length of Rutledge Road and to the field and back and relished the nastiness of her words and tone to Mrs. Townes in the restaurant.

Mrs. Townes . . . there was the tipoff. She would call, never think of her as Fran. Certainly never as Mother. The woman would forever be Mrs. Townes.

She had said ugly, devastating things, she knew, and

knew as well that she was ready to retract or soften none of them. If Daddy was so weak and messed up that he felt he had to marry so soon after Mother was in the ground, then let it be some woman of quality, someone right for him, not some flighty blond divorcee with a nearly grown son.

Is any woman right for my father? No. Not till I'm out of the house and have a husband of my own, if then.

Again Nancy thought of Mike Townes.

And again the crazy fantasy persisted: I'll—get involved with Mike, and somehow his mother will find out. And she'll tell Daddy. And Daddy will realize he can't go into a marriage with a situation like that.

Could I do such a cruddy thing?

No.

Yes.

3

Billy Gillette phoned Monica from the Coast and reported, "I just finished reading a script that Roy Caine sent over. You know I don't jump in the air, but this one's for you, Mon, like no picture's been for you since *Moment*—and this one has it all over *Moment*. Roy claims he's got the backing if he's got you, and Roy's never bulled me in thirty years. I can't get your old price—nobody earns that kind of price from salary any more—but Caine's hungry for you to do the part, so I know I can swing a sweet cut of the off-top gross, along with a decent cash figure. And you'll earn, Mon, because this script's got all the ingredi—"

"Who'll direct?"

"That's the other If. Alex Curtin says he'll do it like a shot, but only if you're aboard."

"That's tempting; Alex is a fine director. Where will they shoot it?"

"Here, probably. But let me—"

"Then do the smart thing and make it with Sig Toban, Billy. Sig hasn't made a money picture in five years, and she can act rings around me, anyway."

"Sig Toban, my ass. This would mean your fourth Oscar, kid."

"I have three now. Except for one I lend to the neighborlady as an erotic stimulant every Monday afternoon from noon till one, I have no idea where they are and I care in-

finitely less. I'll move the Sphinx for you because I adore you, Billy darling, but my last word when I left still stands: I wouldn't go back to that town if you had it gift wrapped for me."

"Suppose I mail you the script and sit with Chine again. If you stay there enough about it, maybe the picture doesn't have to be shot in Hollywood."

"Oh, let's call me a heartless, ungrateful slob and just include me out, darling. I guess what I'm really trying to say is that I simply don't want to do pictures any more, any pictures. I'm struggling to be what my papa and my mama wanted me to be—a nice girl—and I'm not here near succeeding, but I'm doing my dimmest."

"Final word?"

Final word. But I miss you. When are you going to get into the silver and gold and come and see me, my tiered love?"

"When I'm ten years younger," growled her loyal and wonderful Billy. "Okay, kid, at least I tried." He sighed. "Take care of yourself, and I will be getting out there to see you one of these days."

Monica, replacing the receiver and hugging her adventure cat Waldo up in her arms, wasn't at all certain that she had done the right thing. But, she thought wearily, I'm not at all certain about anything, am I?

About anything, except that I'm no less stunned up here than I was on that sweet of a Coast. Doc McSmack nailed it on the button: you never leave the important unsolved puzzles behind. My God, the irony, the colossal irony . . . on the Coast, I committed so many juicy and sick sins in the pursuit of quenching thrills that Eddy, or someone, said that if Moses had ever met me there would've been an Eleventh Commandment. But one thing I never did, even on the Coast: I never seduced Penrod.

Question, Miss Spencer, she inquired of herself: why did you seduce this Penrod?

Answer, Miss Spencer, she replied: Because I'm a destructive, manic, degenerate, solipsistic vulture in the business of demeaning myself by demeaning the defenseless, always a little, always just a little more. And I'll demean him up Brean before I'm done, you can bet your internationally famed bucket on that, Miss Spencer.

Question, Miss Spencer: does your awareness that you have no wish to harm him help a bit?

Answer, Miss Spencer: you should know better than to ask an idiotic question like that. I wish to harm no one.

certainly not this young, young sweet boy. There are debits: his chatter is so naive and locked in youth that it becomes unendurably predictable. There are credits: he is beautiful. More often than not, after all these years and all those truckloads of experienced lovers, he gives me true chandelier-shaking orgasms, them elusive things I'd begun to think had become unstylish.

But sooner or later, as the night follows day, I'll be Old Octopus Monica once again. The tentacles will crush the testicles before he knows what hit him.

Oh, and wait: there's more. I've suggested that he start bringing some of his underage playmates along, so they can be my playmates, too.

Does that answer your question, Miss Spencer, you glamorous *merde*, you?

Not even the autobiography was moving well. She had been joshing herself something fierce.

Ian Flavin, the East Coast literary agent who two years before had sold her on the idea of taping her life story and then had gone on to sell the unbegun book to Boardman and Keyes for a dream of a price, listened to some of the tapes and was blunt. "What these are," he said, "are Eisenhower's memoirs with no mention of World War Two or the White House."

Monica immediately understood. She had consented to do the book because the notion at the time had appealed to her—perhaps Ian Flavin had appealed to her; she couldn't quite recall—and then had wanted out. She had known why then, had allowed the reason to slip from memory, and now again knew why. There was a hell of a Monica Spencer story to be set down, but only if it were the truth—and the truth would stab and conceivably draw blood from a flock of undeserving toes. Even deserving ones.

Why do I promise anything I haven't the foggiest clue of how to deliver?

On the afternoon of Billy Gillette's call, Abraham drove her to Cameron Hospital where, twice each week, she sat in Ward H and chatted with and listened to the half dozen elderly, terminal ladies who had unmendable broken hips and ebbing hearts and adoring children who seldom if ever appeared. The visits depleted and depressed her, but she had begun them (with much the same impulsive gusto she had agreed to the autobiography) and she couldn't bring herself to simply stay away or even to reduce the number

of seats. At each, she read a chapter or two of *Pickwick Papers*. The ladies loved *Pickwick Papers*, including Mrs. Cruz, who barely spoke or understood English.

On that first night, Miss Edendall's house was empty. A week before, Miss Edendall, eighty-three and grey-bright headed, had died. In bed. Of pneumonia. And now, in the next chapter, Miss Spenlow, that Natural Woman, was dead, too, and not her? The night before, Monica was told when she was put into Ward H, Miss Edendall had passed away in her sleep.

The ladies wanted the next installment of *Pickwick Papers*, nonetheless. Monica read it.

Abraham drove her back to East Bare Road, where she propped herself on the couch to read. She could hear Mama telling all callers that she was out. She switched the tape recorder on and, chain smoking, spoke into it:

I was born Mary Elizabeth Spenlow, forty-seven days ago, in my mother's bed in Hollywood, Florida, a town created, halfway between Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Shepherds quaked.

My father, Verne, was a beekeeper, a small man of Southern Florida features, and on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings he was a lay minister at The Church of the Blood of Jesus Christ. He had the conviction of an unrelated man who's just read that the nations are spun less unraveled. He believed that the whale had swallowed Jonah and that he Saved walked on Biscayne Bay, and he taught my mother to teach me that self-abuse guaranteed blindness, baldness, and the lunatic asylum—before, incidentally, I quite knew what self-abuse was all about.

My mother, Ever, the prettiest girl who was older than I and a natural blonde with a little sprinkle's shoulders, eyes of emerald, pinched cheeks, and a voice that should surely died in a sewing machine, and . . . let's see what else could command her delight. Dusting.

My sister, Sarah, eighteen years older than I and the world's greatest undraw, worked as a secretary in Lauderdale, lived at home and would live at home forever for there would never be a man found to marry her.

My brother, James, worked for the gas company and was married to a blusher named Loretta, the world's second greatest dishrag. James and Loretta came to our spotless, cheerless frame house on Balboa Avenue every Sunday, after church, for chicken dinner. The dinner talk, what little

was of it in that ghastly dining room that had the loud-ticking sideboard cherub with the clock in its belly, was always the same: the guarantees of Heaven for good deeds and eternal damnation for bad. Prayer and obedience were good. Impure thoughts and Miami Beach were bad. This sounds cruel, I suppose, but I always thought that James and Loretta never had children because they didn't know how. I imagined that they copulated by solemnly shaking hands.

When I was ten or eleven, my mother came into my room and caught me masturbating—obviously masturbating, over the covers, clearly guilty and no way to weasel out of it. She broke the pencil in two, and she—

Monica abruptly switched off the recorder.

Nuts. I've had it for now. I've had me.

Flip brought a long-haired, bespectacled, slim young man named Mike, his face narrow and appealing, the bones of the skull sharp in outline, and a chesty brunette named Ruthanne, tanned and reserved and bespectacled. Brigid was off at the movies, with instructions to come home, invisibly, by way of the garage door. Mike and Ruthanne were agog to be here, surely, but they successfully feigned being unimpressed, and that was a heavenly blessing. Monica, in bright yellow linen and a gay yellow ribbon in her hair, and just drunk enough to stave off remorse, kissed a startled Flip and blithely said, "Flip, old beloved, would you be a darling and get some appropriate music on the player while I tend bar?"

There were throat-clearing requests for gin and tonic ("light on the gin, please"), and the warming-up talk was intensely spirited and nervous all around (except for Flip, moody and solemn, who talked hardly at all), and the hi-fi swelled the living room with the pure silkiness of Ella Fitzgerald. (Mike: "Did you ever meet Ella Fitzgerald?" Monica: "Only once or twice, but I was a close friend of her husband Barry.") Ruthanne examined the wall paintings, the five-foot-high oil of Monica done in Brighton and the Lautrec original lithograph. "Montmartre," she purred. "I adore it. I miss it even when I'm there."

"How often are you there?" Monica asked.

"Every chance I get. All of Paris is my place, my thing; you can be truly alive there. I don't know all that much about Cameron, although I was born and raised here, but I've been to Paris a half-dozen times and I like to think I know everything there is to know about it. I recognize this

street and this alleyway. It hasn't changed all that radically since Lautrec's time."

Everyone was charmed, fully thought Monica. Everybody

[illegible] conversation, except for an occasional [illegible]—she felt with it, on top of it, but Christine Mills' [illegible] as she had forced Mike to [illegible] every one of her [illegible], with the exception of *Picasso in Capri*. He was afraid he would [illegible] to such a nonsense that [illegible] her, but he spoke about *new* pictures as [illegible] contemporary and the [illegible] bright and perceptive Rutherfords, [illegible] and lovely, discreet Truffaut and Antonioni. [illegible] the [illegible] from [illegible] Monica thought [illegible] her [illegible] and [illegible] Mike [illegible] would [illegible] her [illegible] the years, [illegible] conversation [illegible] that never failed to [illegible] "I'm tactless [illegible] buffs," she said [illegible] the [illegible] table in front of them. "Would [illegible] to see [illegible]"

World-wise, [illegible] Monica [illegible] the [illegible] and the world [illegible] of her friends and [illegible] herself with [illegible] and [illegible] to the [illegible] of organs, clumsy [illegible] yet frequently [illegible] Flip's quick [illegible] at Monica's [illegible] *Now I see [illegible] How to me.* She went to the bar for [illegible] overtly regarding the reaction of the girl, who appeared [illegible] less jittery than the boys, and who [illegible] Monica because she began to smile. Mike muttered a "Wow, here's my Aunt Maude," but otherwise he and Flip were grimly silent.

When the [illegible] was done [illegible] not distressed, but done [illegible] as the boys continued their studies Monica showed her [illegible] of the [illegible] and up and [illegible] to the book [illegible] she still seemed so amused. "As you [illegible]," she said, "I'm known for my [illegible] subtlety. I had to [illegible] offending you in order to waken the gentlemen. Are you offended?"

"*Me?*" The girl [illegible]. "*Il en faudrait plus pour que je me vexe.* A few of those shots turned me on, in fact, although I have this running motor that's kind of always turned on."

"Mike will be pleased to hear that."

"Mike?"

"Not Mike?"

"Frankly, the one who gets to me—he hasn't gotten there yet—is Flip."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"I'm a little nervous," Ruthanne said.

"Don't let them think so. Never let them, or anyone, think so."

They called down. The boys came up, and Ruthanne went with Flip and Monica went with Mike, and before the evening was done all four joined together. Monica saw them to the rear door—the hour wasn't quite midnight—and sleepily, drunkenly drawled, "Ya'll come back, heah?" Mike and the girl went out. Flip, sternly furious, turned to Monica and said "This rips it. Get yourself another pimp. I won't be back."

She was annoyed. "Because I'm a promiscuous sex hag?"

"Something like that."

"Um. I notice, Reverend Davison, that you postponed your lofty moral evaluations and principles till after dessert. Isn't *that* what immorality is all about, my beautiful friend?"

The instant before he blazed out, he appeared as though he was going to hit her, or slam the door at the very least. He did neither. He just left.

Slumping in an armchair with the remnants of her drink, she decided she didn't feel like a triumphant wretched scarcely gratified and triumphant, either, but this was one weary night when the game of Kick Monica was less than a compulsion, and if the furies were outraged, they could go take a flying leap for themselves. What horror had she performed? The girl hadn't been plucked ripe from Mrs. Wiggs' cabbage patch. The boy called Mike had been an innocent till tonight, certainly and a touchingly quivering one, but she had been kind and supportive and surely conduct have bruised his soul.

Awright, awright, she had wounded Flip; the horny Candida had been insensitive to the worshipful Marchbanks. Temporarily. He'd be back. If being knocked about was truly his bag, he'd be back. If not, then so be it. Amen, brother.

Monica blinked at the tape recorder in front of her. She played the last part back, the part that ended:

When I was ten or eleven, my mother came into my room and caught me masturbating—obviously masturbating, over the covers, clearly guilty and no way to weasel out of it. She broke the pencil in two, and she—

Oh, let's play a little Kick Monica after all, she sighed, and reached for the mike and pressed the record button and spoke:

My mother broke the pencil in two and she wept at my grisly crime, and talked in an almost uncontrollably emotional voice about what happens when you insult The Almighty. She didn't strike me, as I breathlessly expected she might, but she told my father of the calamity when he came home that evening.

I knew she told him because he waited till I'd brushed my teeth and was ready for bed, and he entered my room with a long piece of heavy rope. I thought he was going to whip me with it. He didn't. He ordered me to sit up on the bed and put my hands behind my back. I did, and—now see this—he tied the rope over my wrists tight, and gazed at the ceiling, and for the longest while begged Jesus, the Son of God, for the redemption of my soul. Then he looked at me, sadly, and said, "For the next week, I will be here every night to fasten your hands and I will be here every morning to unfasten them. You will be uncomfortable, but only a particle as uncomfortable and disgusted as you've made our Lord Jesus and me and your mother. You committed sin! Our Gracious Father entrusted you your body as a temple of worship, not an instrument of sinful, carnal pleasure. Christ Jesus may find it in His glorious charity to forgive you, but I never will. Never."

The family that prays together.

When I was thirteen, I was bursting to leave home. Maybe my father would find me if I went to Hollywood—Tinsel Town, as my redeemer, Louella Parsons, put it so brilliantly but by the time he caught up with me, I would be in the movies and so famous and making so much money that he wouldn't be able to get into my big house in the fabulous Hollywood hills I read about in Photoplay *and* Movie Mirror. *In Fort Lauderdale one day, I asked the lady at the bus company the fare to Los Angeles. She checked, and it was a bundle more than I had saved up. I was bursting to leave school as well. Holcourt's sleepwalking school, anyway. My grades were consistently good, and I was learning nothing that I wanted to learn about. My intelligence tests and aptitude tests verified what I already knew: I had a goddamn keen and inquisitive mind and there was no limit to how far I could go in some creative field. But how far does anyone go in Holcourt, except to that insufferable church?*

I ached to get out, too, because horror struck my parents' single heart when I merely mentioned trying out for school plays. acting was devilish foolishness and robbed precious time from the real things that mattered, worship and education and worship. I ached to get out because the older they got the more churchified they became, and the prettier and more physically developed I grew the more convinced they grew, especially when they saw boys eyeing me, that disgrace and damnation were just around the bend.

For once, they had genuine cause for concern.

Somehow, from somewhere, I gradually developed something approximating a personality, a sense of perspective, shapely legs, a sense of humor, and a splendid set of breasts and there were whole days, outside the house, when I felt guilty about absolutely nothing at all. I became popular at school (not that that was a feat, I must admit, inasmuch as Miss Popularity at school, Verbena Huckley, was voted that title for two years in a row because she could play The Minute Waltz faster than any of the competition). The boys liked me I liked the boys, and, out of curiosity more than hunger, I was all for research experiments, but the news had spread to even the less fearful of them that Mary Steele's mother was the Countess Dracula and her father the ever-ready Avenging Angel. I continued to masturbate. In spite of sporadic efforts to see it and feel it for what it was, I continued to associate it sex—with dire hauls and punishment.

Damn. I still do.

Over a period of months some of the guilt lessened, so I stopped. Without guilt, it became a pointless thing to do.

When did the de-lowering occur, as Loueda Parsons would ***have put it so brilliantly?***

Not until shortly before I was fifteen. Kermit Wren, who was seventeen and the only boy my parents approved of because he was planning to major in theology, sneaked me out of a weekly Wednesday evening Bible class and off to the Holcourt beach, and for the fifth time that summer we kissed and pawed and panted with all the gay abandon of two irrevocably doomed sinners. On that fifth night Kermit cleared his throat considerably and gulped that we were both too grown up to pet each other to the edge of insanity and then just quit. I wasn't entirely certain I agreed, but I said I did. He'd brought a precaution with him—which he gulpingly insisted on showing me and unaccountably insisted on explaining to me—and promised that if I lost my nerve, he would stop the instant I asked him to.

I was surprised that the pain was actually discomfort, that the experience was scarcely more electrifying and ecstatic than a tooth drilled under a local anaesthetic. Sneaking back to Blue class and reflecting, there was exhilaration, no shame, little more than the certainty that my parents would fall dead when I announced my pregnancy.

When my period came normally, we went to the beach every Wednesday evening for the remainder of the summer. I wasn't in love with the still-gulping Kermit ("You won't get to wear a white wedding dress and it's all my fault" was one of his urbane gems), nor was I roused as often or as dramatically as I learned to pretend to be, but I looked forward to those evenings. There was pleasure in giving pleasure. There was intense pleasure in the furtiveness of the meetings; there was subtle pleasure in fooling my parents.

That autumn, Kermit Wren left Holcourt for college. He was replaced by two boys, Bruce Evans and Marvin Carroll, both of whom went to my father's church and neither of whom suspected that I was doing it with the other boy. I enjoyed the deception, enjoyed playing Hot Sheets Hattie with Bruce and the sort-of-kind-of willing, frightened mouse with Marvin. I was learning. I was an avid student-teacher, and I was loving it, sex itself didn't consume me, but the infinite variety of ways it could be used to manipulate and control did. I had one lesbian experience that autumn, if I won't be commanded to take three giant steps back for such a fatuous, supercilious phrase, and that was with Coralee Owens, sixteen and the least drippy of my girl friends. It was a dreary experience, not because it was an other than normal act—what is an other than normal act?—but because it was nothing more than a mirthless game of playing with live dolls. She agreed, and we never referred to it again, and we stayed friends.

The reason I mention Coralee is that she confided to me as we left that unendurable church one Sunday morning that she'd had her first full experience with a boy the evening before, and described it as beautiful, holy and wrong. I—heap big expert—thought that was funny and let her know it. It wasn't beautiful or holy or wrong, I said. It was what it was: a way of keeping the boys interested. She was appalled. I liked appalling her.

Oh, I nearly forgot. Coralee Owens' first full experience with a boy may not have been beautiful or holy, but it definitely was wrong. She was made preggers, and her family hastily arranged her marriage to the corrupter, Ervin

Renshaw, the bashful son of the bashful town drunk. There's a happy ending, though, a genuinely American happy ending. They had five—count 'em, five—more babies together, and I learned years later when I ran into Marvin Carroll in Edinburgh, of all non-Holcourt places, that Erwin became an accountant and went onward and upward to become the mayor of Holcourt. For three terms yet.

Les bonnes actions ont toujours récompensées, n'est-ce pas? *as Rathanne would say, and probably often does.*

Monica came awake at noon in the armchair with a thumping head. She suffered through a ballshot and two aspirins, and she barked when Brigid suggested breakfast. She swam, made Brigid tell her a Mr. Charles Forbes had telephoned, asking if she would do a fifty-second tape for the Cameron radio station, to help raise funds for the multiple sclerosis drive. "Say no," she snarled. "If he calls back, say I have sclerosis and it's affected my brain. God knows something has." She phoned Gordon Whitehall. Gordon was surprised to hear from her and said sure, he'd buy her dinner. Abraham drove her to New York and Gordon took her to the Côte Basque. Tamara Rolanov had called off the wedding, he reported with no perceptible grief, when she learned he didn't like parakeets, including hers.

"Find me a play, Gordon," Monica said.

"For real?"

"For very real."

"What kind?"

"Anything that isn't *Necking on the Roof*. No lazy fluff. People send me scripts and they're all *Necking on the Roof*—if 1937 ever comes back, they'll be enormously timely theater. I hate acting but it's about all I know how to do, except to bollix myself up. I need discipline storch uses fall of it. A hard play, a play with balls, a play that'll make me work. Is there one around?"

"I'll sure find out in a hurry, Ugly—if you mean it."

"I do."

Abraham drove her back to Cameron. There was a message that Flip had called and would call again. Monica swam for the second time, despite the dark, and lifted Waldo into her arms and carried the cat into the house. The Persian was seventeen now, with most of its plumbing in disrepair. She hugged it, and stroked its neck, and listened to its rattling purr, and whispered, "Don't die on me, old timer. You're the only man I ever loved."

4

Julio Jesus Concepcion, eighteen, was found unconscious and bleeding from the head on a Corbett Avenue sidewalk by foot patrolman Lester Shantry. In Cameron Hospital, when he was able to speak, he told police he had been walking home from his job at Cameron Cleaners when three men—not young men, not kids—blocked his path and called him a hairy spic slacker. He hadn't the chance to defend himself or run because one of the men had hit him from behind with something hard.

Concepcion was coordinator of Cameron Students for Peace Now.

Flip read the sketchy account in the *Sun Sentinel*. The report came over the 6:30 radio news, just as sketchily. At dinner his mother asked no one, "What would you call a boy like that? A Puerto Rican? A Cuban? Spanish, or what? Who'd name anybody Jesus? I think that's terrible."

"What is he? I know what he is." Flip's old man hooted. "A traitor. A Benedict Arnold Peacenik."

"Still in all," his mother said, delicately mopping her stew plate with white bread, "I don't go along with anybody beating anybody up, especially three against one. I don't care what the reason is. But that name! Whatever taste that mother had that named him, all that taste must've been in her mouth."

"'Three against one, three against one,'" the old man snorted. "Because a spic commie says so? If he says twenty against one, a hundred against one, then you'd believe that, too, right? This country never had a bit of trouble we couldn't iron out by ourselves till these scum agitators and Reds came along. We nursemaid 'em, we coddle 'em like little babies, we put their picture in the paper like they're the heroes instead of the garbage like they are."

"Still in all . . ."

Suddenly Flip had an eerie, sinking feeling. His old man wasn't just a loudmouth. His old man knew who the three heroes were who'd roughed up Concepcion—all 115 pounds of Concepcion.

For the third straight day, he phoned East Bank Road. The housekeeper claimed she was out. On delivery days he asked, and the housekeeper still claimed she was out. Now

that his parents had word that Howie had arrived safe and sound overseas and everything was swell there, the old man was talking about taking a week's vacation early this year—to stroll on the boardwalk at Asbury Park and bathe in the ocean and go to *band* concerts, for Christ's sake. The old man invited him to come along: "Glenn can run things at the store for a while. We can park your mother somewheres—there'll be a TV set in the hotel room: that'll suit her fine—and you and I can mosey around and talk."

"About what?"

The hurt, dark look. "Whadda you need, for me to print up a card ahead of time, what we'll talk about? We'll *talk*, father and son."

"I don't think so. I have some things I have to do this summer."

He wrote a letter to East Park Road. He loved her, he wrote, in spite of that bad evening. She'd invited him to be a hypocrite, and maybe he was, he wrote; he'd accepted the switch and joined in on the family plan because it was paying out a kick he might never have the chance to experience again, he wrote, and maybe she was right: if you don't at least reach for the brass ring the first time around, there's no guarantee you'll get a second turn. But he'd joined in mainly, he wrote, because he was afraid that otherwise he would lose her. With her, even sharing her, he was alive. Without her, he wrote, he was worse than dead; he was nothing, he was invisible.

It was a lousy, whiny letter. He didn't mail it.

Flip and Julio Concepcion weren't tight friends, but he decided to make a visit to the hospital to see him. Mike offered to tag along. Mike Townes was still forty feet off the ground. "Man, like there we were, and she was *thanking* me! Me! A big star like that!" he exclaimed. "And then Ruth done cutting loose . . . wow, that was too much, that was the night to cap all nights! You weren't swinging too bad yourself."

"I guess it was better than a band concert."

Nancy Forbes, looking great, and her apparently new number, Ritchie Atkins, were in the hospital ward when Flip and Mike got there. Everyone knew everyone well enough to greet one another, and Flip asked Julio, who wore head bandages, "When do you get sprung from here?"

"A few more days, with luck, Flip," Concepcion answered. "I was just telling Nancy and Ritchie that the first job at hand when I get out is to make a noise and keep on

making it in this town about what happened to me. I don't mean me, Julio Concepcion, but the fact that any guy can get hauled around just because he's for peace and believes in working for it. People don't have to agree with my principles a hundred percent or even one percent. But they have to be made to see that if one guy can get zapped for his beliefs, so can the next guy and the next."

"Our brave, courageous newspapers had fighting editorials about littering at the beach, but not a one-line editorial about Julio," Nancy complained.

"We've been over to see the well-fed establishment at the *Sun-Sentinel* to protest, to get them off their butts," said Ritchie Atkins. "Only the lower echelons were in to listen to us, and they said they'd see what they could do, and then showed us the door. That type of systematic run-around. Well, we're just beginning."

"Maybe that's not how to handle it," Flip said. "Maybe the way is to carry a tire chain and use it the next time the patriots gang up."

"Yeah," Mike said meekly.

"Hold it, hold it," Concepcion said sharply. "That's exactly not how. Nobody ever get anywhere with that eye-for-an-eye jazz. Bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki didn't bring peace, except to the thousands of people it killed—all it did was give mankind a short breather between wars, and a lot of grief. No one in Cameron, or anyplace, is *evil*, can't you see that? Not even those three beer bellies who rammed into me. People will get sore about any kind of brutality, but all that happens when they read force is met with force is that they get their backs up and we're right back where we started. No, this cause is too important to turn into an old-fashioned gang rumble. All causes that matter are too important for that."

A scandalized nurse appeared with a soft but stern lecture on only two visitors at a time, and ordered all four out at once. Flip remained for a moment. "Did you recognize any of those three guys, Julio?"

"No, it's just what I told the cops: it was dark, and they were moving just too fast. But they had to be laying for me; they knew who I was. If they paraded in here right now, I wouldn't identify them. I might be wrong because it was dark that night, and I might get an innocent man in trouble. You know how it is, Flip."

"I suppose. Take care, man."

In the corridor and elevator and main lobby, Atkins was

pounding his fist into his palm a lot and hotly sermonizing that Concepcion's point was on the nose, that a little fascism was like a little pregnant, that what had taken place on Corbett Avenue could take place again, anywhere and to anyone, that the point had to be hammered home, again and again, to the still-decent folks of Cameron. Nancy was quietly arguing with Mike. "Everything you're saying sounds right on," Flip allowed in the parking lot. "But nobody out there's listening, or going to listen. You're spitting in the wind. That's about all it'll ever add up to."

Atkins stiffened. "Is that why your shining face is never seen at any marches, any meetings, any anything except a basketball game, Byron?" he bristled. "Because you're too busy, too above the battle, to lean over and get your hands dirty? Maybe people like Julio and us are spitting in the wind. But at least we're spitting. What're *you* any good at, except to sit back and tone yourself out?"

You asshole, thought Flip. You're exactly right.

In Flip's Chevvy, Mike Towner was goggle eyed. "Either somebody's sapping sunflower seeds into my cereal, or *something's* doing," he marveled. "First, Ruthanne Cumberland won't speak, then Ruthanne does, then Monica Spencer does, too. And now here's Nancy Fortes, I didn't even exist before, and here she's asking why don't I call her up some time. Where'd I acquire this fatal fascination bit, all of a groovy sudden?"

"Some of us got it, lover boy, and some of us don't. You got it."

When he called her the next time and her housekeeper fed him more frammis, Flip blew up. "Great. Just tell her this is the last call," he said and slammed the receiver, and after a while he found that he felt almost as relieved as angered. He read his whiny letter again, and thought, She can go to hell. Nobody should keep crawling on his belly like this—not even for her. *Without you, I am worse than dead. I am nothing, I am invisible. . . .* Crap. I quit, lady. If I have to be some anxious wetnose kid every minute, I quit.

Then she called him. She asked if he would come to her. Flip balked. And went.

She looked softer, younger, more subdued than he had ever seen her. "I've missed you," she said.

"So I've noticed."

"Don't be cranky. I've missed you," she repeated, more seriously now.

"Starting when? A minute before you called me?"

"No . . ."

"Okay, then talk. Give me some answers. Explain."

Her mood switched to defiance. "Drop that strongarming, damn you," she demanded. "Explain? Explain what? Explain how? This morning I watched a ladybug take forever to climb a wall. Why was it so determined? What did it think it was going to find when it got to the ceiling? Is there an explanation? Does there have to be? You'll take me as I am, you won't third degree me and there'll be no possessiveness, and in return I'll do my best to keep us both amused." Abruptly smiling, she said, "I consider that an eminently fair exchange."

It would be enough of a fair exchange, Flip thought as tempers cooled and they made love later, because it would have to be. It would have to be, even when she told him she wanted him to arrange another party—not only Ruthanne and Mike, but others as well, as many others as possible. He argued. With too much traffic here, the danger was that someone was bound to let something slip somewhere, he said. She was quite serious, she promised. He promised nothing, and knew he couldn't lose her.

Guys like Carl Huber and Shep Hubbard would be ready any time, they said. Chris Troat asked too many questions, looking for a catch, as if he were being conned into buying a ham clock, so Flip said, "I'll fill you in more later," not intending to. Ruthanne Cumberland was more than ready. Crystal Redfern, one of Nancy Forbes' heavy money friends from that fancy private school and a chick some rumors claimed liked to swing, said she'd think it over; she wasn't sure she could go the distance, but she might dig watching.

Flip saw Georgia Twardesky coming out of Woolworth's. He'd heard about her old man being smacked and carted off to St. Agnes', and she said he was coming along all right. As Flip expected, she took to the party idea. "Groovy, doll," she declared, "if I can bring someone. Maybe in like a week or so, okay?"

"Sure," Flip said grimly. "Bring the Air Force."

Nancy asked Forbes' permission to go for the weekend with some Cameron Students For Peace Now kids in the Poconos, where they would hike, eat canned goods, sleep

in canvas bags, and conduct what amounted to a three-day conference on how best to get their message through to Washington and the public He knew some of the kids, she said. Hilary Gosnell, Richie Atkins, and—she looked at him Mike Townes. Mrs. Evans from Miss Barnaby's would be along. So would the Cameron Peace Trinity, Reverend Trumble, Rabbi Loeb, and Father Bingham. Forbes privately checked with Marcia, who was a faithful member of Trimble's church. "If Reverend Trimble is there, we've nothing to worry over," Marcia confided. "He's a bit too liberal for my tastes, politically, but he certainly wouldn't allow any girl and boy to go off together by themselves."

Forbes phoned Fran. "Pack your insect repellant and suit," he directed. "You and I are going away this weekend."

"Charlie, when I suggested we cool it for a while—"

"This Friday, early afternoon. If you have appointments, cancel them."

At *Brant's* Friday morning projects meeting, scouting for news and trend articles that could afford a week or more of research and writing as opposed to current news that couldn't, Forbes listened to ideas from most of the magazine's department heads, questioned and nodded and argued down and questioned some more, okayed approximately half of what he heard and offered ways to hypo other ideas that were promising but still shapeless The remainder of the morning was taken up in a gaggle of correspondence and telephone calls. One of the calls was from Fiona Kendall, the Liverpudlian, who had flown in from London and was stopping at The Drake. Damn, I'd completely forgotten this was the day, he thought, and greeted and welcomed her effusively, and took a deep breath and confessed he couldn't see her till Monday.

There was dead air for a moment. "That is a bit of a shame, isn't it, Charlie?" she softly rebuked. "I did write I was coming and staying but five or six days. You're really the only person I know here. Point of fact, except for a meeting or two, you're the reason I came I doubt I'd care much for riding some tour bus to your Grant's Tomb or whatever, alone." Forbes wiggled out; he would instantly arrange for some *Brant's* charmer to escort her to the best restaurant in New York and to the most-impossible-to-get-tickets-for play. And Monday evening was a firm, unbudgeable date. Fiona agreed. She wasn't happy, but she agreed. He hurriedly explained the situation to Marshall Hammett, the first presentable bachelor he could think of. Marshall

had wicked plans, too, but he hadn't been with *Brant* long enough to refuse the assignment.

Two of Forbes' good friends, Alton and Gwen Danforth, spent their summers in Malibu, and he was free to use their beach cabin in a deserted private part of Rhode Island, a half mile from Watch Hill. He met Fran in the autumn in three days, stopping only to buy a week's supply of food and wine. The chestnut cabin leaned outward at a drunken angle between a garden covered with sweet-smelling grass that was thick and mint green and a rocky beach along the gleaming, almost motionless sea. He swam (he suggested the suits be left unpacked but Fran gallantly corralled him into saying "I don't see why we bother for rules should be just for the display of idiots") and the entire state was covered with moss and clues. There was a Towles' Lucky, a Towles' Lighthouse, and beyond the bay, the Towles' Beach, and Forbes laughed every time they were happy, and they did not talk about children.

Forbes knew more about Fran. She had left a secure, loving Jewish home in Newton to attend graduate school in New York, not to become a scholar, but to prepare herself to be a wife to Forbes Towles, whose professional ambition was that of a wildly successful writer who was sophisticated and well read and cosmopolitan and who married beneath him and exulted. Fran had written in Europe for several months, during which time he spent extravagantly so that of all the castles he would explore, and taught her not only to love him with all his weaknesses but to enjoy his love making with all its joyous refinements. They came home to find that his father had died in crushing hock, his fortunes, and spirit refused to give up his and Fran's expensive East 67th Street apartment. He took job after job, hated it for a time, still clinging to the dream that his life's ambition was to write novels for the destitute in Bel Air, while Fran returned to school and got her degree. When she became pregnant, gloriously pregnant, Towles coldly arranged for an abortion, informing her that he had no intention of living with soiled diapers in the luggage. She refused to abort, and Towles refused to stay with her. She hated Forbes, divorced Towles, and never remarried.

"Why didn't you marry again?" Forbes asked his wife as they lay in the cabin's soft, squeaky bed. "There must've been plenty of chances."

"Not all that many," she answered. "Young men don't

passionately inclined toward inheriting a stepson. Oh, there were chances, yes. But case work is a peculiarly insulated, incestuous field. The parties you go to are where you meet and keep reinecting and reinfecting other case workers, and even though we're useful people—I'm convinced of that most of the time—we can be deadly away from our desks. We say, 'Would you pass the ambivalent butter, please?' and when we go to bed together, after we've talked it into the ground, it's for intellectual fulfillment, it's something to discuss the next day with the analyst."

"You're not like that. Were you ever?"

"Well, I had to fight it. I had a long, long affair with a social worker, a thoroughly decent young man named Milton, who loved Mahler and the Museum of Modern Art and read Proust and who had the guiltiest mother hangup you ever did see. Do you know the precise instant I decided I wasn't going to marry Milton? We were making love, I guess you could call it, one night, and at the moment of climax he cried out, 'Relationship, relationship!'" She laughed. "How's that for a soggy saga?"

The weekend continued to be a delight, and Forbes became satisfied beyond all niggling misgivings that this was the woman for him. On Sunday morning, he said, 'We're going to get married. Not in the year 2000. This week."

The Friday and Saturday glow left her face. "No," she said. "For the reason I gave you in Cameron, Charlie: no."

The abruptness and finality in her tone angered him. "You love me."

She nodded.

"You love me, and I love you. And I love my daughter, too, but she won't automatically fold up like a dollar card table. Something I forgot for a while is that Nancy's tough. She'll adjust. Life's one adjustment after another. We all learn that, she'll just have to learn it, too. I'm not bringing home some two-bit hustler I picked up in a Barbary Coast dive."

"You wouldn't be bringing only me home. You'd be bringing Mike as well—unless we decide to have him join a traveling circus."

"I'm fully aware of Mike. I own a five-bedroom house—he won't have to sleep in the cellar. My credit's good at the grocer's—he won't have to eat scraps. What the hell do you mean, *Mike?* Of course Mike will be my son!"

Fran sighed. "Oh, Charlie dear, let's face what we haven't faced. Nancy's sixteen. Mike's sixteen. They're living under

the same roof would be ambivalent butter, don't you understand?"

"No, I don't understand," he protested, and heard himself add, "all I'm beginning to understand is that you seem to be looking for any safety valve you can find to keep a desperate divorcee."

Appalled, she exclaimed, "What a cruel thing to say!"

Gradually, Forbes' anger began to grow, and so did Fran's, and the bickering became a fight, and largely because he recognized that he was behaving childishly and irrationally, he ordered that they close up the cabin and leave.

"I couldn't agree more," she snapped.

The three-hour drive later to Carleton was frosty, mostly silent. Fran, who rarely smoked, asked for a cigarette. Forbes gave her one, she coughed and crushed it out in the ash tray. Once she began a letter-to-Santa-Barbara-this-ventures, but the suggestion of humanity only served to fan Forbes' temper. A little later he seemed to be groping toward an apology, but his own cold, words of anger reduced him to silence. Driving to the front of her apartment house, each waited for the other to say something conciliatory. Neither did. Fran got out.

He reached his home before three o'clock on that Sunday afternoon. Marian, just arrived from work, Mom was surprised to see him home so early. "Nan Nancy wasn't back yet, she said, and there had been a telephone call for him from a Miss Spencer. 'Could that be Monica Spencer, Charlie?' Marian asked, and gave him a private wink. 'It sounded just like her voice."

He phoned. "You rang me up about doing a tape for multiple sclerosis, Miss Forbes," said Monica Spencer. "Actually it would be about multiple sclerosis, wouldn't it? I'm sorry I didn't get you the message sooner. I'd be glad to do it, if I won't have to be dragged to some dank, drafty studio. Fifty seconds, you say?"

"Fifty. I can have a script and a recorder here, Miss Spencer. I'd be happy to bring them to you for those fifty seconds, at your convenience."

"Excellent. I should be free later this afternoon."

"Fine. I'll be there."

"Is this your business, fund raising?"

"No. It's volunteer."

"I'm at 66 East Bank Road. You can't miss it. My house is the first one with a tan roof on the left."

6

After the Carl Keene Fellowship dinner on the last Friday evening of the month was done and the unfinished business finished, and after the minister and the boys with their Dads and the really old gaffers left to go home, Matt Doheny ran the silent stag movie he ran two or three times every year. Fred Byron, Senior, and most of the guys knew the movie backward and forward by now, and they tolerantly, affectionately, hollered for Matt to stow it and shove off. Few of the men paid strict attention to the movie show. There were matters to discuss.

"Nigger gal, black's the ace of spades, sittin' there in a booth at Birdie's with this white hippie guinea, his hair come down to the *floor!*" Sully Washburn hissed, "At *Birdie's!* There was the time, not too long back, I could take my first wife, God rest her soul, and the kids to Birdie's when they wouldn't serve you a cuppa coffee at the counter unless you were clean as a pin. Niggers and fugitives from the barber shop they leave in now, anybody. Go anywhere, you see 'em everyplace."

"You ever split black oak, Sully?" Curly Penner kidded. "That's supposed to be good luck." Curly Penner was bald as a bat and a great kidder.

"Never! I swear it on my first wife's grave," Sully Washburn swore. "I served a year in North Africa during the War, and I could'a had all the nigger whores I wanted for a quarter, but I wouldn't go near one of 'em, not me."

"Hey, you guys, you wanna look at this or you don't wanna look?" Matt yelled.

Fred Byron regarded the grainy screen from the tail of his eye. That girl and that man were going at it like a house afire. Terrible. How was filth like that allowed? "Well," Byron began, "Cameron's not the town it was when I grew up here. I remem—"

"What town is?" Sully snorted. "Travel anyplace. My sister Nora, she lives right outside of Birmingham, Alabama, she married a printer, you wouldn't want to meet a nicer joe, he has this forty percent disability from the service but he gets up every day and goes to work, you know what I'm bringin' out? His name's Schwartz, George Schwartz—Schwartzy, we call him—it sounds Jew but it ain't, it's from

Austria. Anyway, he . . . where was I at? This beer . . ."

"You have this sister Nora," said Cliff McCandless.

Byron covertly peered again at the screen. That girl was really naked on the man with her, which made her look like she wasn't just acting, either.

"Yeah," Sally nodded. "Nora and them are down on the Fourth of July to say hello. Holiday rate. She says you folks will rock your door for the night before and leave there, the way the whole staff—colored *and* white—just dance around and look at you. Don't tell me about Cameron. Where my sister's talkin' about is *Aubanal White* man's country, and look what's goin' on!"

"What was you saying?" Matt called. "You watchin' this or not? Come on! He's about to get it good."

Byron had watched enough to see the other girls around watching, and he was glad, when he returned, was when the girl sort of slunk away from under and got up and opened the door and another girl came in, and they now started to go to town. Boy, that blonde with the harlequin glasses had a rear end on her. Matt Doheny, with seven or eight kids, sure did go in for that crap.

There was agreement that the lesson they'd taught that hairy spic—Concepcion was the name, you couldn't even pronounce it—was only just the beginning, not because anybody enjoyed rough stuff but because keeping up the longhair element at the high school left up to the county seat. "My nephew Paul's a cop," Sally reminded, "and he tells me he's dreamin' of cleanin' over to the Greens, where at least there's somethin' to do. Just last week Ralph hauled in some of those hippies, they were standing on the sidewalk not letting people pass and talkin' dissent. Well, he pulled 'em off and give Ralph lip for it, and he took Ralph in front of everybody. You beat that?" There was agreement that the time to tackle it was now, before it was too late. There was agreement that another round of beer was in order. Matt's movie was over. "This is the last time I'll bring this show for you mugs," Matt complained.

The evening broke up at eleven, and the remaining men began to leave Castle Hall to go home. Most of them were a little squiffed on the extra beer, Byron realized, although none of them would have any trouble driving. In the vestibule outside the meeting hall, Jake Welles stopped for a moment and looked at the framed picture of Jesus Christ on the cross. "How's about that, something I've seen a million times

and never really noticed before," he drawled—pretty squiffed, after all, Byron winked at the guys. "There's Jesus, and he's got long hair. God *damn.*"

The guys were on their way out and hadn't heard or didn't care what they heard, but Fred Byron was instantly, indignantly shocked. "You just better never let me hear you blaspheme again, mister," he hoarsely objected. "You just better never let me hear you take His name in vain *ever*, you got that, Jake? I'm not kiddin' around, now. I'm serious."

Driving toward Carpenter Street, Byron reflected on those boys at tonight's dinner with their Dads. Nice boys, all of them, some of them Flip's age. Why was Flip so against these get-togethers? Why was Flip so against him? Howie was different. About all you ever had to say to Howie was, *I'm your Pop, and what I say goes.* You never had to say anything twice to Howie. Goes to show you how many different kind of apples there can be on the same tree.

He and Marge would go to Asbury Park. Little Artie was at Scout camp. Maybe with the salt air, and no kids and no distractions, maybe Marge would be nice to him again between the sheets, the way she was a long while ago.

Who's kidding who? A long while ago is a long while ago.

Fred Byron parked the car in his garage and simply sat for a time before he got out. Marge and Hazel Brundage were on the front porch glider; didn't that scarecrow ever go home? In the kitchen, he poured a glass of milk and went to the back porch swing. He sat there until he felt sleepy enough to go up to bed.

7

Cameron Students For Peace Now camped near Honesdale, Pennsylvania. Ritchie Atkins, the chief firebrand, had little time for Nancy.

Mid-morning on Saturday, during a disorganized and spirited conference in which everyone sat in a close circle on the grass and Ritchie took sharp, almost strident issue with Rabbi Loeb (Ritchie: "Excuse me, Rabbi, but what do you mean the Black Panthers aren't for peace?" Rabbi Loeb: "I'm not saying that, Ritchie. What I'm saying is that the Panthers, for all their justified hurt, may be helping their own cause with their tactics. I'm not versed well

enough to comment on that—but their every other word, honey' this and 'pig' that, doesn't further *our* cause, which I submit is a larger cause." Ritchie: "Excuse me again, Rhoda, but the cynical expression of my protest group is the cause, don't you see? Everything converges." Rabbi Loeb: "If we sit here and argue—" Rhoda: "But it all connects. I can't see why you're free to see that . . ." Nancy, in white duck shorts and beach thongs, slipped away and went for a walk.

Mike Townes, in shredded madras shorts and barefoot, caught up with her, and she paused so he walked along with her.

"Hot and heavy back there," he said.

"Mm."

They strolled a narrow, sandy dirt road in silence for a while. Then Mike said, "Listen, Nancy, how tight are you and Ritchie?"

"Pretty tight."

"Then why'd you ask me to call you up when we looked in on Julio at the hospital?"

She picked up a fallen twig and pulled the bark from it. "I didn't ask you. I just had it . . . suggested."

"Great. I figured that why? All the time we've known each other I've always had the idea you were putting me down."

"Putting you . . . How would you get, Mike? I like you. You've just always sort of stayed in the background, that's all."

They walked into a wheat field. The sun was high and hot but not fierce. Mike showed her a wrinkled joint. "Feel like smoking?" he asked warily.

"No, thanks." She paused. "I wish you wouldn't, either."

"Because some farmer'll see me?"

"Someone might. It's not that I'm so down on it, but a lot of the activists are people with the *Sun Sentinel* mentality. If you're for peace, that's bad enough, but if you're for peace *and* pot or grass, that proves their argument that cutting weeds is right. When we held that peace vigil in front of the courthouse, the paper took pictures of us and our peace signs, but they didn't miss one of those 'Legalize Pot' signs, either. That did damage. I'm afraid damage."

"Okay, Mother Superior. It's done," he said, grumbling unhappily, and put the joint back in his pocket.

Nancy grumbled, too. "Thanks, Father Michael."

They sat on the ground, and her body went rigid as his

arm slid around her, but as quickly she forced herself to relax, to pretend to relax, aware that he could be managed, not sure that she didn't want this to be the place, the time, particularly the time, not sure if she wanted, or didn't want, to manage him. She let his hand go under her shirt as he kissed her, but she carefully, gently, moved it away. He behaved Much too fast and obediently, he behaved

"Your mother and my father seem to be a big item together this summer," she said quietly.

"Yeah, so it seems. That's why we should all be one big happy family."

Nancy looked at him. "Do you think they're having an affair?"

Mike looked at her, and scratched his knee. "I sure don't think they just say good night at the door."

"And you don't care?"

"Care? What's to care or not care? Long as your Dad doesn't have a bug, and as long as my mother's having a ball, what's the hard deal?"

"They might get married."

"Yeah, they might. People do, I read someplace."

"Has she talked about it much to you?"

He shook his head and grinned again. "She's not one for heavy talks about her personal life."

"Aren't you even *in*terested?"

Mike's grin broadened and he touched her again, more freely this time. "Sure. I'm an only child, just like you. I'd welcome a little sister."

She shuddered involuntarily and smiled at him, neither liking nor disliking him, not wanting to smile. He was saying something more, but his voice went through her as through hollow wood. She slapped his hand playfully, feeling not at all playful, and stood, and stretched her arms high. "Let's go back, Mike. They'll all think *we're* having an affair."

"Wild. Let's not disappoint them."

"All right. Some day."

"Promise?"

"On my honor, Father Michael," she said.

They had walked scarcely a dozen steps when she changed her mind again, and turned and solemnly gazed at him. Mike understood. They sank, clutching at each other, and her breath was a sharp pain in her lungs as she allowed more, encouraged more, feeling passion, feeling nothing, stirred and repelled and fascinated, and then suddenly she

drew away because the reason for it was so dishonest. Mike [illegible] showered, but she was careful to touch him tenderly and to tell him sweet lies about how much he had been missed. On the way back to the others, he seemed to walk taller, and Nancy walked with him, touched and alone.

6

"She'll help you sell your songs, Tom!" George enthused. "You know who Monica *Spencer* is!"

Tom Jun knew who Monica Spencer was. He had seen her in a movie once in jail. He had also seen her picture with the thirteen pairs of Jun Tom Ray. The first of them was still with him, when he let himself remember . . .

From seventeen to twenty-four, Tom was in one prison or another for a total of five years and three months. Robbery did it, and forgery, and bunco, and car theft, and bribes. The year he promised Sister Jude, when that he was never in for murder. Mama Schuber, the last time, had never been for dope, for he entered and left Wethersfield, he was happy and was convicted in New Mexico for [illegible] Wethersfield. His mama's [illegible] Sam G. Blossom was the name, according to an Arizona newspaper—Jud't wanted to [illegible] Mama, but he couldn't [illegible], either. There was the [illegible] and the Torrance Street [illegible] knew how to be a master-[illegible] but when [illegible] to [illegible] pretty Mama. He knew [illegible] the [illegible] near the Torrance Street [illegible], but the [illegible] were of no help. The [illegible] claimed she was good only with merchant [illegible] with [illegible], and if she'd sold the knife she couldn't remember who [illegible] sold it to. The fuzz showed her a [illegible], blubbering [illegible] Sam G. Blossom. She claimed she might [illegible] to him, but couldn't rightly recollect.

When he was [illegible] at seventeen or maybe eighteen, someone thought to give him intelligence and aptitude tests. The cat who brought him the results was a spade Catholic priest with a shiny eight-ball skull named Father Anthony, who was also a head shrink for those suckers looking to be shrunk. "These tests show you have a great deal to offer, Tom," Father said. "They indicate you're a mighty angry

and insecure cuss, with an attention span that needs work, but if you care enough you can make some big waves in something artistic—music, writing, something along those lines. But you have to accept and like yourself first."

"I love me."

"I don't think so. I'm more than willing to help, *if* you do care enough and if you trust me. You know what psychotherapy is, don't you?"

You're crowding me too fast, man. "I figured your gig was to save souls with the Hail Mary bit, padre."

"There *is* that, though it's certainly not a condition. There are other grabs."

Warily, Tom said, "What would I do with a nut doctor? That means laying *him*—on a sofa and finding out why I part my hair on the right instead of the left is because when I was a day old I was scared by a French fried potato, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. It means catching up with that particular French fried potato, and seeing why it scared us and why all it is, in the long run, is nothing more than a French fried potato."

"You're a tricky Christer, you know that? How old are you?"

"Forty."

"Listen, tell the truth now. Once in a while, you get just a little horny for a chick like the rest of us roosters, don't you?"

Father brushed that. "Once I entered the Church I didn't stop being a man. What I found, and what I have, is something bigger than sex. Bigger for *me*, I want to emphasize. Not for you, or any other man. Me."

"Yeah? What'd you find that's bigger?"

"Service," Father answered flatly.

"Serv—? Come on, man! Does that warm you up on the frosty nights?"

"It has so far. I think it'll go on. If it doesn't, then I'll stop being a priest because I'll be satisfied I can't be an effective priest. Let's talk about you, Tom. Would you like me to help you track down that French fried potato?"

Wary again, Tom said, "By talking, huh?"

"Yeah. About everything. Even and especially the stuff that hurts."

Tom frowned, and then chuckled. "Hey, go play in traffic, good ol' spade padre. I don't tell *myself* secrets. I'm sure's shit not about to tell them to strangers."

He wanted to call the priest back and say, *Water. Water is my French fried potato.*

Water. My head under water. When I take a shower I can't keep my head under the nozzle for longer than a second at a time, for fear I'll drown. There was this lady I loved and trusted when I was a very little kid, Mrs. Purdy her name was . . . I was in the bathtub and she comes at me like a cyclone and puts my head down in and holds me under till I like to burst open from not breathing . . . I always have to be clean and I'm always scared out of my gourd about water over my head. Like a crazy, like some certified crazy. Not a day passes that I don't picture that picture in my head . . .

He wanted to confess this, and couldn't.

In one of those stinking jails, he got hold of a guitar, a cheapie with a crack you could see through, but he and it fell in love with each other at first touch. He worked with it, and another guy showed him some chords and breaks and then he worked harder at it, and the times with it grew into important times in those dreary days. There were days when the perfect sounds he heard in his head wouldn't come out of the guitar, and he cursed the old box and told himself that someday he'd get a really good one and show them all. He became better than good—not just better than good, he knew, but great, up in there with the best of them—and he knew his pride was justified, because he had worked, and mastered.

From flight to flight and bust to bust, Tom began to take very special shape. He read of great leaders and of mystical Indian religions, learned to see music and hear pictures, learned he had a unique gift for psyching people out but hadn't yet learned how to use his gift to the best advantage—or to any advantage. He shrived those zeroes who tried to block his flight, and there was always a rushing, sometimes ecstatic sense of power in that, but a power that seldom lasted beyond a day. He strove to make friends, not with grubs and losers or even grub winners, but with nice people. Nice people stayed nice only up to a point, and then, because they feared him or suspected he was after something, told him to get lost or fled from him. Nonetheless, he swore the next job would be the last, because of course the Father Anthonys knew what they were laying on him and what he was laying on himself: wasting your life inside was strictly a loser's game.

At twenty-four, he was still drifting, still in flight, still

pulling penny ante scores, still tapped out. At twenty-four he hadn't a single friend.

At twenty-four, he met a shrewd cat named Cannibal Stokes, who'd heard of him and who laid out plans for a whistle-slick side-street drugstore heist that could haul them in some heavy bread for a few minutes' work. Cannibal knew exactly where the pharmacy's after-hours alarm system was and exactly where the cushy supplies of morphine were stored. (Tom: "If it's such a cinch, what do you need me for?" Cannibal: "Because quick lockpicking isn't my bag. They tell me you can pick better than any boy around. And I need two smart eyes for a lookout.") Tom listened and turned it down because it came on too clean, too whistle slick. He changed his mind, and the score went like God had blessed it. Cannibal did most of the work, but when he cashed in the dope he was generous. the ten-minute score paid Tom eight hundred dollars.

With the gold—more than he'd ever had in his kick at one time—he and Cannibal traveled in new threads to San Antone, where Cannibal had a chick named Connie, a wildass stripper who, he promised, was always great for a laugh when there was sizeable gold to be spread. The strip joint was called the Teardrop, with a piano and drum combo and one bored, flabby stripper after another, each mechanically doing her turn down to the pasties and then lumbering off the small stage above the bar to be replaced by the next bored, flabby stripper. Tom watched over his Schlitz, still unable after all the years to dig why people—not only in a rundown joint like this full of degenerates, but probably damned near everyone, everywhere—were so hung up, so out-of-proportion obsessed with . . . well, with what that bleached pig up there was bumping. He had had women since Brenda, a slew of them when he wasn't to sea, and the classiest of them went straight loco ape under and over him, sweated like horses, grunted and called out stupid things like *I'll die it you stop* and *I love you*, treated the dirty act like it had something, anything, to do with love.

Stupid, plain stupid. He did it, endured it, because it was the fastest way to exert power for an hour or a day over some bimbo. And they dug him—man, man, but they dug him—and sometimes yammered for more, even the foulest and the classiest bimbos he smacked around. But couldn't *anybody* see how rotten, how unnatural it all was?

Cannibal introduced Connie, a hard, strident blonde who looked even grubbier than she'd looked up under the stage

lights. Her constant talk was ratatat and there was too much of it; she couldn't be still for a second, her nine-long blue-painted fingernails kept tapping the surface of the bar, and she chain-smoked, and she drank Canadian Club doubles, on Cannibal, and cracked dangheap jokes, and eyed Tom up and down and remarked to Cannibal, "Where'd you locate this yahoo at, hon? Cute."

That was the night Tom met Arlene Jo. She was one of the strips, but she was nothing like Connie, nervous but not ratatat nervous, no long blue fingernails, nothing like the other dumpy broads who trudged across that stage like cattle. Arlene Joe Beatty was a chubby but electric redhead —no, not chubby, voluptuous, classically voluptuous, with wide-set burning eyes, and a full mouth, a little come-on tough, but young, sweet young, almost innocent young.

Like she'd never been buried. Like it was all pretend.

They all flew to Las Vegas together, in the first class section where the whiskey was free and you could have all the drinks you wanted. They checked into a class hotel ("Mr and Mrs. G. G. Groover, Mr and Mrs. G. G. Groover, Jr., Houston, U. S. A."), demanded and got adjoining rooms, each one grand and glittery and looking down on the kidney-shaped, lavender pool, rooms with blurry but real color TV sets, and you slipped a quarter into a slot and the bed would vibrate, actually vibrate. The desk drawer had stationery and colored post cards. Tom wanted to swim. Arlene Jo wanted to gamble. Tom still wanted to swim. Arlene Jo sauntered into the adjoining room and sauntered back and said, "What they wanna do is what they're doin'. Guess what that is?"

They swam and they gambled, but only later. Arlene Jo crooned, "Man, you are the roost. Forever and for all time to be, you're the very most."

For the first time in his life, he allowed himself orgasms. For the first time in his life, he allowed himself to thoroughly dig a woman. She told him he was a real honey and so easy to talk with. She told him she hadn't met too many real gentlemen, and that was what he was and she appreciated it. She still came on a little tough and brassy, but only when Connie and Cannibal were around; alone with Tom, she was a kitten, sweet, playful, soft, warm. She was nineteen and from Coburn, Texas—she giggled when she said the town was spelled "Cockburn"—and she wasn't crazy about stripping but she'd been a lot less crazy about working like a dinge in factories. She hadn't had any schooling to speak of, but she liked to read—not only junk, but

the *Reader's Digest*, too. "I go for that 'How To Increase Your Word Power' section," she said. "What they claim is, 'Use a word three times and it is yours.' I believe that." Tom sang her some of the songs he'd composed, stressing that they sounded better when there was musical accompaniment. "Boy, what are you, a genius or somethin'?" she enthused. "Those are great numbers! I bet I could get the fellas at the Teardrop to play them."

For the first time in his life, he allowed himself to show a hidden part of himself. Their third night in Vegas, she snuggled and admitted she was just about never sure of herself, and she added, "Not like you. You're never scared about nothin'."

"Don't bet on it," he said gruffly. "I am, sometimes." He paused. "Most times."

Her eyes saucered. "*You?* Don't hand *me* them frijoles! I think of you. I think of the Rock of Gibraltar. Don't you kid a kidder, big tiger."

"Okay."

Of the eight hundred dollars, he had slightly more than forty dollars left when they returned from the four days in Vegas. Connie thanked and cuffed Cannibal, and Tom rather expected Arlene Jo would do the same. She said she was goofy about him, that money was the greatest if you had it to throw around, but otherwise who cared? And, anyhow, he was going to be a big time songwriter: Lucky, her boss at the Teardrop, would be back in town in a couple of weeks, and Lucky had a whole lot of connections. Tom thought Arlene Jo ought to marry him. She agreed.

There was no talk of where the bundle for Vegas had fallen from, nor where nor how there would be the next bundle. Cannibal scouted out another drugstore, this one in San Antone. The alarm did go off, despite Cannibal's guarantee that he knew how to quiet it in front, but they stayed until the right shelves were cleared and they were safely on their way before the fuzz car's alarm fused with the drugstore's.

The take for Tom was a windfall, nearly double the other's eight hundred, but he wanted out. "That last one was too close to the bone, man," he told Cannibal. "The next time we ride for a score, I'll be back in the joint, even if we jimmy a gumball machine. I feel it. You go, baby, but I have my old lady now. I'm not looking to love her from back inside."

A justice of the peace married him and Arlene Jo. A cop caught Cannibal Stokes on his very next job, and a judge tucked him away.

I'll stay clean, Tom determined. I have loot. I'll make more, but kosher loot. For Arlene Jo. To skip the treadmill I'll stay clean.

Her pad was one room over a funeral parlor—he needed time to accept that bit, and never really did—but they loved each other and he had never been so happy. She had Kip, the Teardrop's pianist, write down Tom's best song, *Your Cheatin' Ways,* as a favor, and talked Kip and Dick, the drummer, into playing it that same night. She urged Tom to sing it into the microphone. He was too shy, so Kip sang it, first announcing to the slot customers who'd come in to guzzle and watch bare skin that the composer was in the house. Nervous and apprehensive, Tom listened:

Once I loved you, darlin',
Thought I'd love you to the end of my days
But I never could get used to
Your cheatin' ways.

You said you'd love me always
Said it's gonna be the devil that pays
But you knocked me for a loop with
Your cheatin' ways.

Why weren't you true to me
Like I was true to you?
You left me here to cry
'Cause of your roving eye.

Can't ever trust you, darlin'
Though you'll haunt me to the end of my days
I never can forgive you for
Your cheatin' ways.

Though the applause from the slobs was meager, he realized anew that his music was special. That he was special.

He didn't dig Arlene Jo's stripping down to pasties and G-string, but she kept explaining that it was just a gig like any other, that when she paraded around up there she was thinking of nothing and no one but him. He had to grant that her act had more style and class than the cows' did.

and that she never got really vulgar. He didn't dig her B-girling either, although he understood that sitting with the slobs and getting them to buy more watered booze than they'd planned to was a major part of the Teardrop gig. The eye he kept on her—and the customers—was an eagle's.

When her boss, Lucky Cortez, came back to Antone from a vacation up North, Arlene Jo showed off her wedding ring (she'd wanted a ring from the dime store, but Tom had shelled out fifty-five bucks, insisting on only the best) and showed off Tom, and raved over what a genius he was. Lucky was a tall, hard greaseball, with a waxed mustache and a chilly gaze, but he took a shine to Tom and advised him to look up some Antone contacts and to mention Lucky's name.

The contacts—a country and western song publisher and a disk jockey on a pea-sized radio station—spoke fondly of Lucky, and they listened to as many of Tom's numbers as they had time for, and they were down-home pleasant enough, but he was out on the street before he realized they weren't going to do anything for him. Arlene Jo declared, "That's all *they* know, big tiger. We'll publish the songs ourself and get rich." For a time Tom didn't care, for his old lady was in his life, in his bed, and constantly in his corner. Lucky gave him a job at the club, as a relief waiter and relief bartender but mostly as a bouncer, he wasn't big, but his feet were faster when they needed to be. He enjoyed bouncing. Usually he could clear an offending redneck out of the place with tactful language or a freezing stare. When that didn't work, he would escort the slob outside and pile into him with deadly force and absolutely **no mercy. It felt fine.**

The fights with Arlene Jo, when they started, were furious, too. They began in earnest a few months after the wedding, when a church supplies convention blew into town for a week, loaded with gold, and the all-male customers at the bar were three and four deep. He caught one of them hand resting on Arlene Jo's rump, saw that she wasn't trying it away or even minding, and he grabbed the slob's collar and rushed him outside and kneed him and threatened, "You're one sonofabitch who's about to get all crippled up if you're ever in these parts again." In the room over the funeral parlor, she argued that she was only doing what Lucky had told her and the other girls to do: string the convention spenders along so they'd keep coming back.

"Lucky told you that? Hey, man, that's a groove. What

do you do tomorrow night when Lucky tells you to spread for the spenders so they'll keep coming back?"

"Oh, that's cra—"

"I'd kill the next sonofabitch that touches you. And I'll tell Lucky that."

He didn't have the chance. The Romeo with the free hand brought a cop to the club, bridling to prosecute. Lucky Cortez warned Tom to stay out of sight, smoothed things over by persuading Romeo that the bouncer would be let go, and, in the bargain, sent one of the strippers to Romeo's hotel.

And fired Tom. "One more sweet temper kid like you and I can close up," he roared. "Arlene can stay if she wants to, but you, boy, you're out."

"We'll head on," Tom said to Arlene Jo when they were alone.

"Yeah? On what?" she challenged. "I got me a payin' job. Do you?"

"That's no kind of job if my wife's going to come home with handprints on her. I'll find something. I don't want for my wife to work, anyway."

"You don't *want!* Looks to me like what you want and what you get is always two different things. Great big song writer, big talker, big deal dreamer, you're gonna do this, you're gonna do that. What type job's good enough for you? What can you do except talk big? All you're good for is screwin', and you're gettin' to be a drag in that department, too."

The attack, the anger, jolted him. "I never heard this kind of stuff from you before," he said quietly, evenly.

"Well, I been thinkin' it."

"You've been sleeping next to me in my bed and thinking like that?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Millionaire: *my* bed. Why shouldn't I think what's so? I just didn't have the guts to say so till you made me feel like two cents in front of Lucky. *Your wife.* I'll leave you in on something else about *your wife.* I *like* what I do. I *like* peelin' for all those guys. I *like* givin' them a hard-on. I *liked* that fella feelin' me up. At least he had on a good suit of clothes he had the dough to buy himself. That's the innocent little farm gal you married, big spender, big dreamer."

Tom left San Antone. He hitched rides to Del Rio and down to Villa Acuna, earning bread along the way by working hash houses for a few days at a time, lifting wallets,

getting by. Mexico depressed him. In Coahuila he got a beerboy job at a class hotel and fell in with a widow lady his mama's age, an American lady named Mrs. Northrop who was there alone and who invited him to sneak up to her room. She gave him twenty-five American dollars when he was done. Tom took the twenty-five, and, as she gaped in pique, helped himself to the rest of her cash, her diamond ring, and her jeweled wrist watch.

He went back to Antone, because Arlene Jo was there. She blubbered that she hadn't meant a single word of the crazy things that had come out of her, begged forgiveness, swore she loved him, swore she would never sass him back again.

"Pack up," he ordered.

The loot for the ring and watch wouldn't last long, but the hell with getting up tight too soon, or ever; he had his old lady back. One night away from Antone, in a seven-dollar motel, Arlene Jo said her period was never regular, but if she didn't come around in the next couple of days she might have to get herself checked. "How long's it been?" he asked.

"Close on to six weeks. Last time I had it was when you . . . walked out on me. God, honey, a baby's the last thing I want in me."

In Austin a week later a doctor said yes, she was pregnant.

"I'm going to get rid of it, Tom," she whimpered. "I don't want no kid."

"I do. We keep it."

They stayed on the move until the money was gone, and neither of them could find anything but nothing jobs. Superstition or not, he told himself he would be running Cannibal in the joint if he tried for another auto-theft score—and he had to concede at last that Arlene Jo's lean-deep pay beat dishwasher pay. Against what he sensed was his better judgment, Tom let Lee phone Lucky. Cortez accepted the collect call and agreed to let her come back if she would promise to stay put; some of the steady trade was still talking about her. The room over the funeral parlor hadn't been rented. They settled in again, and she returned to her gig.

The fights returned, as well, trivial fights that could expand without warning into jumbo battles. She didn't want no kid. Any kid, he corrected. He wanted to be a daddy just to prove he had a pecker, she screamed, but she was the one who was going to go into the hospital and suffer

the pain, she was an interpretative dancer with a gorgeous figure and who was going to buy a drink to see a freaky fat lady peel? There was no union for Tom to join because he would have had to produce his stir record, but he drove another guy's cab on the day shift and tended dingy little bars, and he started to make enough to salt away some for the time when Arlene Jo would weigh herself out of the Teardrop.

They fought and made up, fought and made up. She raised loud hell when he wasn't bringing in enough money, and she raised louder hell when he wasn't in the room to welcome her and massage her neck because he was out hustling for every dime he could. The making up was worth all the crap Tom took off her. She loved to ball, repeated surely a dozen times over the months, "What I said about you bein' lousy in bed, that was a straight-out lie. Nobody hasn't ever done me like you, Tom. Nobody ever will." More often than not, balling was still a foreign, animal act to him, but Arlene Jo loved it, and he loved Arlene Jo.

When she had to quit the club because her belly grew, she read magazines and sucked and went to the movies and drifted into the habit of blowing pot most afternoons with her cow friends, Connie and Vera. One evening he approached the funeral parlor after pushing the hack for ten nonstop hours, and saw Connie walking a yard and a half off the sidewalk from pot. She was on her way to work, but she had to stop long enough to let him in on the groovy secret that his old lady and Lucky Cortez were having some happy hump sessions now that Arlene was safely *enceinte*. In the room, he remarked with careful casualness that he'd heard a rumor making the rounds that Lucky, the well-known family man, was a little-known ladies' man, as well. Arlene Jo, higher than Connie, automatically snickered. "That's what I hear, too," she nodded. She snickered some more, but she wouldn't meet Tom's eye.

He went to the club and confronted the greaseball, who looked worried. "My missus and I don't keep secrets from each other, Lucky," he said cordially. "She says the two of you're playing a little house together." Cortez went white, but Tom's smile broadened. "Hell, I quit being one of those jealous hubby types, Lucky. I decided: as long as my woman's having herself a carnival, that's all that matters. I live it up now and again, myself. Why I dropped by here, though . . . I figure that you might care to lay a few crusts of bread on

me, seeing as how you're enjoying the hospitality of my household."

"Does she know you're here?"

"Of course not! My wife's no whore."

"But you are. Why should I hand you anything?"

"Hey, maybe you're right, Lucky. You shouldn't. See you around, you know?"

Four nights later, Lucky Cortez' Dodge exploded, with Lucky in it. The fuzz had known for a long while that he was having trouble with the Syndicate. They went after the Syndicate.

Arlene Jo jumped into hysterics when she heard about the accident, and so did Lucky's large, loving family. He was serviced in the funeral parlor under the Jaras' furnished room. Strippers wept at the cemetery, and Gene, Lucky's head bartender, mumbled, "There was a right guy, a real right guy." Tom comforted the shaky, faltering Arlene Jo at the graveside. He would have killed her, too, but that would have meant killing the baby.

The baby, Tom Jara's baby, came seven weeks early. A Mex nurse took him to see it. It wasn't a son It was a girl baby, and he would call it Denise Rochelle. It was red and purple and scaly. It had tiny, wrinkled fists scrapping all over the place. The card read *Baby Jara.* Sweet damn. It was ugly, and its head was bigger than any other baby's head in the room, and it was perfect, and it was Tom Jara's. *Baby Jara* Damn. Hot, sweet damn.

"You keep?" the Mex nurse teased.

"O ho, you bet You bet'cha I keep. Where's my wife? Take me to where my wife's at. Is."

"She no' out of the anesthetic yet, maybe."

"Take me there."

He hugged Arlene Jo. "That's some swell baby," he declared.

"I seen it. I'm set to send it back to the factory. I carried it a hunnert years, seems like. It's the crummiest, ughest thing I ever seen. I don't want it, I don't want nothin' to do with it. I don't want nothin' to do with you. I'll never have the gorgeous figure I had before. I'll have veins. You ruined my career. You ruined me. Thanks a heap, buster. You wanna be a mother? *You* take it and be a mother."

Up. Then down. *You wanna be a mother?* You *take it and be a mother.*

He walked. He walked to the furnished room. The room

had one light bulb on the cracked ceiling, eighty watts. Tiny ants roamed around the sink drain. The window sill was caked with dust, and the fattest cockroach he had ever seen was limping along it. The radio didn't work. He opened drawers. The belongings in his drawers were neat. The junk in her drawers was stuffed and pitched in. Hairnets. Brassieres, filmed with dirt. Mesh stockings with runs. An almost empty jar of Lady Esther Cold Cream, without the top on. A bed of slips and stockings and garter belts and more bras, a two-year-old *True Confessions,* a cigarette butt. A bra a lady elephant could fit into and not feel the pinch. Silks with holes. Stuff. Crap. *The Book of Common Prayer* with pages missing.

You wanna be a mother? You *take it and be a mother.*

He walked from the room and the neighborhood where his daughter would be brought. He walked fast. The street lights were milky.

Denise Rochelle had to be brought up right, had to have the right things, the right start. Cannibal Stokes was out of business. Tom checked the territory and the talent. Eddie Dutton assured him that the Buchanan Warehouse was a can't-miss sitting duck, that its alarm was the best in the West because it was out of date, that his brother Elmo could drive like the wind. A night watchman got in Tom's way. Tom, who didn't dig guns, shot him and the watchman died on the spot. Ninety billion fuzz rolled in with guns of their own. He was sentenced and convicted. Armed robbery and manslaughter. Eddie and Elmo drew only armed robbery.

Tom used his forty-seven months well. He read. He didn't read law, as the other readers read, to agitate for new trials that might free them on technicalities. He read more religion, more psychology, more about leadership. Once out, he would never go in again. Once out, he would lead. He would purify an impure world.

Now, in the kitchen over Georgia's daddy's saloon, he watched Georgia fry him a cheeseburger and listened to her jabber about old Monica Spencer making everybody sit up and recognize him and give him the respect he deserved. Sure, he thought. The time was long past due.

"How far's Monica's place from here?" he asked. "Let's go."

Chapter 6

1

Forbes had been away from Nebraska for more than thirty years, yet there were times, such as this early Sunday evening, in Monica Spencer's large and tasteful living room, when the hayseed, however invisible, would not get out of his hair. Lord, she was a stunner! The years had enhanced the wonderfully etched face, strengthened rather than dimmed the magnetism of the deservedly famous eyes and smile, altered not at all the lovely, statuesque figure.

They sipped gimlets, and chatted. He had rather expected her to be pleasant, though hardly this cordial, this gracious. She seemed eager to keep chatting, in no hurry to get to the multiple sclerosis taping and clear him out. He chose to believe she wasn't simply lonely for any company. She liked him, he decided, and that felt extremely good.

"Naturally I know *Brant's Weekly*," she said warmly. "I read it. A lot of the time I don't agree with it—especially when it's overly Olympian on foreign policy—but I read it."

Forbes grinned. "It hasn't always been kind to your movies."

"Oh, *that*. My recollection is that I was always reviewed well. Of course most of my pictures were catastrophes. They earned the scratch, but a solid seven-tenths of them were atrocious."

"'Were'? That's past tense."

She nodded. "Enormously tense, and as it shall stay. Enough already with my moom pitchur career; I can't imagine anything drearier to talk about. How's your drink doing?"

"Fine. How's your life in Cameron doing?"

"Well, all the returns aren't in yet. I like it, I think. I grieve for New York City, though, I must admit, with pure, who-asked-me-anyway selfishness. The theater used to be a

continual thrill; now you come out of a musical humming the score from *Annie Get Your Gun*. I adored those Irish saloons on Third Avenue—Glennon's, Costello's, Clarke's, Moriarty's—but now they've become tourist attractions for Dayton suppository salesmen and their flowerpot-hat wives with blue hair. Manhattan once had a divine, unique vigor to it. Now it's—well, what? . . . the only thing that makes it different from every other city is that it has a more advanced thyroid." She laughed. "I'm a common scold. And a rapidly aging one—only we old codgers weep in our gimlets for what used to be."

The taping went perfectly; she did it in a single take. Forbes suggested they have dinner together one night. "I'd like that," she acknowledged, and as if she meant it. "I'd like that very much."

Nancy and the Atkins boy were on the front porch when he got home. Young Atkins was picking out chords on a guitar until he saw Forbes. He stood, good manners that pleased Forbes, and they shook hands, and Forbes kissed Nancy, his half-smiling question-mark Nancy, and asked about the weekend. Nancy said it had been all right. Atkins proceeded to recount the gist of the weekend's important conferences, at more length than Charlie Forbes, patient and diplomatically tolerant, cared to hear. He excused himself when he could, because he gathered that was what Nancy wanted him to do.

In his study he debated phoning Fran to say, "We're both being foolish. I'll come over and we'll straighten things out." He lifted the receiver, and replaced it in its cradle. No, he thought.

On Monday evening he called for Fiona at her hotel, and they dined at the Laurent. Fiona, looking fit, chattered about the wonders of her newfound city, whose streets were almost as untidy as London's ("That's being too tolerant a guest," Forbes said. "No town on earth can beat New York for its dedication to untidiness. We have fines here for not littering"), but a city with a pulse and excitement all its own. "I'm utterly captivated by all one can get on your American telly," she said. "Seven channels, and all at the ready, no matter when. Do you know what I did, my first evening while I was running my bath? I dragged the telly on its wheels to the door of the bathroom, and I soaked myself and watched *Huckleberry Hound*. Priceless! I love all that activity at half-nine in the morning."

"Oh, we're a genuine cultural fount here, all right. And

you're a moron. You could've turned on an FM station and heard Haydn at half-nine."

Fiona smiled. "Maybe." The smile was stiff, and the conversation grew stiffer. "This wild rice is sumptuous, Charlie. It's so wild, it's oversexed." A still stiffer smile. "Like me."

It wasn't working: what had been right enough and natural enough between them in April was wrong and awkward now, and Forbes knew it and suspected she knew it as well. In her room at the Drake she phoned down for highballs and seemed puzzled and disappointed that he didn't kiss her, that he carefully avoided touching her. When she emerged from the bathroom later in a semi-transparent robe, no longer smiling, Forbes believed he couldn't put off letting her know—somehow, hopefully without hurt—that sex might convey something to her that he had no intention of conveying. He told her that he and a woman he'd known for several years were going to be married. Fiona blinked, and then was angry. "That's bloody unfair of you," she said. "You might've said so in a letter, before I came lumping over here to the States."

"You were coming, anyway, to *Brant's,*" he reminded, keenly conscious of sounding defensive and cowardly.

"Rot! Half a man would've written me. No, I'm not the understanding, stiff-upper-lip sort. I'm not that sort at all I want you to leave If you want to sack me from my job, that's your privilege. But leave."

"Don't be silly, Fio—"

"I'm not silly. I'm furious."

On Tuesday evening Forbes and Monica Spencer drove to Stratford and had drinks and dinner at Fagan's, where people at other tables openly and covertly gawked at her and where she politely yet firmly refused her autograph to an officious middle-aged lady in drop earrings and wedgies. "How to start a fan club," she sighed, looking magnificent, on the way to the Shakespeare Festival. "I've gradually, grudingly come to accept the fact that cretins who ask for autographs aren't necessarily cretins, even when you're trying to eat your dinner. But I've always hated sideshows, even when I'm it. I shouldn't—how expensive a price is it to pay? Maybe that woman could've traded two of my signatures for one of Vera Hruba Ralston's. Oh, what a cruel broad am I." They watched the first act of a strong production of *Lear.* At intermission, the locusts descended again, with pens and programs.

"My pub-a-lic," she said, "just won't leave me alone since they read I discovered radium, freed the slaves, and now what was that other thing I did? Oh, yes: had my sex changed while I was visiting the pornography fair in Denmark."

"Would you rather we leave?"

"Could we? You're enjoying the play and I'd feel dreadful if I dragged you away from it. But could we?"

Her housekeeper, a Mrs Carmody, served drinks in Monica Spencer's library den, and Monica Spencer said, "Thank you, Brigid And good night." The housekeeper nodded and closed the door after her.

Forbes moved carefully, but she was ready for him. They danced to no music, and kissed, and her voice was shaky when she murmured, "Will this sofa do? There's a guest room with a bed in it right next to this room, but it would take ever so long to get there."

Seconds later, on the sofa, clothes scattered, he teased, "You don't have a perfect face, after all. You have a small upper lip and a very wide, broad lower lip."

"Yeah? Well, let's see how imperfect *you* are, you insulting long drink of water, I'll show *you* for hurting my feelings!"

She received him. "Oh, damn," she muttered. "Damn, damn, damn."

"What is it?"

"I can't find anything imperfect. Oh, damn, darling . . ."

Before he left, Monica promised to wait for his call on the next day.

And meant it, until she was alone and commenced some serious boozing. Ah, these adult idylls I begin, she thought wistfully and almost bitterly, and then quickly lose my nerve because there's no net beneath. Doc McShrink recommended, millennia ago, that I have affairs only with men stronger than I. What bloody bad taste! I've always been scared to death of such men.

At noon the following day, Forbes telephoned Monica Spencer from his office. "Miss Spencer's not home," said Mrs. Carmody. "I don't know when to expect her. Maybe next week."

"Did she leave a message for me?"

"No."

Sully Washburn was at the wheel of his Chrysler. Fred Byron, Senior rode next to him. Curly Penner sat in the back seat.

The three men had bowled five sets at Phil's Bowl-A-Rama, and spoke now, at eleven o'clock, as Sully drove each of the men home, of not just talking about it any more but really getting a bunch of the guys together for regular, once-a-week tournaments. "Maybe in the fall we'll do it," said Byron, who didn't like bowling and was reluctant to admit it, who bowled with his friends occasionally because Marge kept telling him a man his age didn't get enough exercise, who had no patience for sports, who had never learned how to relax and just enjoy himself.

Fred Byron never bragged or lorded over Sully or Curly, but he was more successful than both of them, and this he enjoyed. They had gone through the junior grades of Cameron's schools together, had been friends—not close friends, but friends—since boyhood. Sully and Curly had played it safe and followed their fathers into the foundry, where they would stay, without worries, till pension time. Byron, with no more education or money, stayed in the foundry only until he had saved enough capital to borrow more from the bank, and then had opened a store. The store happened to be a grocery, a tiny one on Franklin Street. It could have been a store selling neckties, or ladies' wear, or furniture. But it was a store, and it belonged to Fred Byron. The prospect of working his life through for another man as boss had been, and was, unthinkable.

They spoke of tournaments, and of vacations, and their children, and the cost of living. Then Sully nearly had an accident. He had just turned onto High Branch when a loud motorcycle suddenly zoomed past the Chrysler from nowhere, so close that it damned near took the car's paint with it, and for a moment Sully lost control of the wheel.

"Jesus!" Curly hollered.

"Jesus!" Byron hollered.

Sully pushed the gas hard, shouting, "You goddamn maniac!" and Byron, still shaken, knew that Sully was determined to catch up, and wanted him to. The night wasn't all that bright, but they could see two people on the

motorcycle, a man driving, a girl tight behind him. "I'll *kill* 'im!" Sully roared. "I'll *kill* the maniac sonofabitch!"

"Yeah," Byron said, almost to himself.

Sully caught up, but couldn't keep up; the cycle was still going like a tornado. The girl looked to be no older than sixteen or seventeen, and she had a big, excited smile and she yelled at the Chrysler, "Frig off, baby!"

"Leave it go, Sully," Curly cautioned. "Don't start up with crazy kids like that."

"Hell I will!"

Eight or ten blocks later, the motorcycle slowed and Sully overtook and stopped it by nosing it to the side of the road. He leapt out. Byron, throbbing anticipation, did, too. In a few seconds, Curly followed. The motorcycle guy seemed only a couple of years older than the girl, had on goggles and no helmet, his hair was longer than the girl's, and he wore a black leather jacket and on it was a Viet Cong flag and a Nazi swastika. He called out, "Hey, man!" when Sully pushed him off the motorcycle, and the girl cried out, "Let him alone, pig!"

"You shut up!" Sully bellowed and shot fists into the young guy, and Byron hurried to try to pin his arms when the young guy began to hit back. The girl started kicking, so Curly yanked her away and held her. "Where's your license to handle that machine, you punk?" Sully demanded. "Lemme see your draft card."

The punk struggled, and Byron caught one heavy blow at the temple. Sully sent a special brick of a fist into the punk's belly, and Byron didn't have to pin him any longer because the wind sailed out of the punk and he fell, like paper. That wasn't enough for Sully, who knelt, and grabbed the punk by the hair and puffed, "Punks like you, you own this town, you gotta learn some lessons. You got the commies' flag, I see. You got a draft card, you maniac punk, or'd you burn it up because you're a maniac commie?"

"What's this draft card bit, man?"

"'Mister!' Call me 'Mister,' not 'man'!" Sully thundered and hit him again. But the punk must have found his wind fast, for he shot up and dove at Sully, and Byron rushed in with new strength because the punk was suddenly getting lucky. They pounded him, repeatedly, and they were hurting him, hurting him good, and blood raced through Byron's head, dizzying him, and he punched with all his strength, and it felt great. He could hear the girl yell, glanced over and saw Curly beating her up on the ground, and that wasn't

right, but this was, this sure as hell was, and Byron kept punching until Sully pulled at his shoulder and said, "He's out, for Christ sake, can't you see that? Let's clear outta here."

The girl was out, too. Fred Byron and Sully Washburn and Curly Penner rode away. They were silent for a while, and then Curly said from the back seat, "I hope they didn't get killed."

"Nah," Sully said.

"That girl," Byron said. "What'd you have to go and smack her around for?"

"You kidding?" Curly cried. "You know what she did? She kicked me straight in the nuts, I'm back here all doubled up, almost. *Girl?* Wildcat's more like it."

In his house, Byron reread Howie's letter, the first one he'd received since he'd learned that Howie had arrived overseas, safe and sound. Marge was asleep Flip's car wasn't in the garage. It was a long letter, a fine one. Howie wrote that it was pretty rough over where he was, but he didn't go into details because that was one thing about that boy: he was no crybaby. He wrote about his buddies, and he wrote a lot about growing up in Cameron, the best town in the whole world, with a Mom and Pop who were the greatest a guy ever had. It was a letter full of love, and Fred Byron's eyes filled up, just as they'd done when he'd read the letter at supper.

He went upstairs to bed. Of course that motorcycle punk and his girl friend weren't killed.

The *Sun-Sentinel* was delivered to the store the next day at noon. There was nothing about the night before on the front page, and Byron was immediately relieved. The punk, Dale Whiting, and his lady friend, Ursula Peters, were in Cameron Hospital, but they weren't seriously hurt. They claimed they had been beaten by three middle-aged men for no reason at all. They doubted that they could identify any of the men without mug shots, but Whiting thought their four-door car was either a Plymouth or a Chrysler.

What also relieved Byron was that the police, in going through the then-unconscious pair's pockets in search of identification, had found supplies of peyote, poppy resin, marijuana, and various pills that had not yet been analyzed.

Dope, thought Byron. We did some good, after all. We got two dope fiends off the streets.

He worked hard that day, as he always did, but his

concentration was almost continually interrupted by the memory of how it had felt to sink his fist into that long-haired punk. It had been different with that spic, that Concepcion, however you were supposed to pronounce it. Sully had been the one who'd used the pipe. Byron hadn't wanted him to go that far. But last night was different. Once he'd got going, he couldn't stop, didn't want to stop. If Sully hadn't pulled him away, he might have killed the punk.

He shook his head and decided the resting up in Asbury Park with Marge couldn't come soon enough.

3

Lydia Rothstein suggested to Fran that they take their vacations together, perhaps to Martha's Vineyard. "Sounds wonderful, but not this summer, Lyd," Fran said. "I haven't seen my parents in ages, and I'm guilty about it. I'll be flying out to them in about two weeks."

She asked Mike if he would go to Minnesota with her to visit Gram and Gramp; his boss at The Shoe Box, Bill Fisher, would grouse but surely give him some time off. "I'd rather not, Ma," Mike said. "I have a stack of things going. You understand."

Fran did, and chose not to embarrass him with his real reason. He loved his grandparents, but they were getting old, and more and more difficult for a restless teenage boy to cope with. The last time he'd obediently gone with her to Minnesota, her parents, meaning well, hadn't let him alone: *"What's the matter, they don't have barbers out there in Cameron? Frances, how do you allow him to run around in such sloppy clothes like the cat dragged him in; whatever happened to pride? Michael, eat, what you eat wouldn't feed a bird. What do you mean, you may not go to college, are you out of your mind, God forbid?* Fran understood and was sorry he wouldn't join her, only because her parents genuinely loved him, however devouringly, and would have taken huge pleasure in clucking over him, their only grandchild.

Mrs. Curtis, a bit of a clucker herself, would look out for Mike. He even seemed happy that Fran was going away for a time and leaving him to his own devices.

At C.C.S., however, when she casually announced that

she would be going on vacation, Barry Dwiggins met the announcement with momentary paralyzed shock.

"You can't do that!" he protested. "Then I'd be *all* by myself!"

I obviously was too casual, Fran thought. "Has something new happened?" she asked gently.

He wouldn't look at her. "I have to say something," he declared.

She waited.

"My father really laced into me this morning. I never saw him so sore. He said he'd tried everything on me, the kid glove, the father-to-son jazz, everything. This morning, he said he was through. He threatened to fire my lawyer if I didn't start opening up, he even threatened to kick me out of the house and then I'd see what it's like to fend for myself; that's how he put it. Wow, he never talked to me like that before. Never . . ."

"Then you've learned something harsh but true: parents have breaking points, too, even the most loving of them," Fran said. He nodded. "How long *do* you plan to go on pretending this case won't come to a head, Barry? Why have you felt you can't be completely frank with me? The records we keep on you are safe—your lawyer did his best to get your file from us, and Dr. Boornazian turned him down, and he'll turn down the district attorney's office, too, no matter how tough they get. Whom are you protecting, and why? It can't be Lewis Brown; not that filthy, despicable man. If Brown was the supplier, that's what the court will be primarily interested to know."

He nodded once more.

"I'll ask you again, Barry. Whom are you protecting?"

Barry Dwiggins sighed and stared at his gold cigarette lighter.

"Mike, for one."

"Mike?"

"Your son. Mike Townes. Some others, including Mike Townes."

Don't let him see, don't let him sense the panic, she warned herself.

"That's mostly the reason why I kept quiet till this morning. It's like I said once before: if I lay out one name, I'll have to keep going. They'll make me; I'd go ape under pressure." He lighted a cigarette. "'Pushers.' There's no such thing as pushers, not in our pack. Not for money. The only one who gets rich is the original supplier, a guy like

Brown. We're not in it for the loot. Chet Olds was after dough and nothing else, but not most of us. Yeah, I made a profit dealing for a while, but that's not what dealing's all about. We buy junk or pills or anything from guys like Brown, and like we'll pass the supply around, whoever wants what's his particular thing'll buy it from us, they'll pay us what we paid out for it."

"You mentioned Mike . . ."

He nodded. "Mike, lots of us. Whether Mike trips or even turns on any more, I don't know, we don't keep that much in touch. Now do you see why I couldn't come right out to you, Mrs. Townes? These sessions mean a lot to me, just about everything. All of us keep each other supplied. Nobody gets hurt. Well, once in a great while, like with Dottie Donlin, but nobody told her to o d"

Don't cry out, Fran thought. Stay. Stay.

"Anyway, this morning with my father did it. I told him everything I just told you. I told him Mike's name, and other names I had to, Mrs. Townes. I'm not a pusher, like they make it sound. Cats like Mike aren't, either. But I guess legally, that's what we all are, even though we're not in it for the bread." Finally, he looked directly at her. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Townes. I *had* to tell my father Mike's name. A person can take pressure only so long, you know?"

Confronted in the apartment that night, Mike was sharply defensive. "Dwiggins is making a big thing out of ancient history," he scoffed. "Sure, there was plenty passing around in school up through June, and there'll be plenty starting in September, but I was never really in on that drug scene. Dwiggins figures he's up against the wall. That's why he's dropping names all over."

"What does 'never really in on the drug scene' mean?" Fran asked evenly, feeling anything but even, watching her son Mike, Michael Jonathan Townes, ex-baby, ex-child, not a man, Mike, her stranger.

"Okay, I never laid everything out for you," he conceded. "Hey, Ma, don't look at me like I'm a junkie or something! I was into a couple of different things there for a while, last fall and winter, sure. But I'm clean now, I don't go near anything. I experimented a little because just about everybody else was, and I saw it wasn't my thing, so I quit the whole *schmeer*. Simple."

"Not quite so simple, my intellectual giant," Fran rebuked, angered by her anger. "You behaved stupidly. Getting

into any drug because everybody else is doing it is a stupid excuse—lame, weak, stupid. Aside from that, your following the crowd last fall and winter is going to put C.C.S. *and* me in an awfully undesirable position if your name is brought up in the Dwiggins trial. And apparently it will be."

"Well, what can I say? I'm sorry, Ma."

"You're sorry. That helps. That solves everything."

Somehow, she got through the night, and through work the next day. Nettie, the switchboard operator, buzzed her that Mr. Forbes was on the line, and could she talk with him? Fran had not seen or heard from Charlie since the Rhode Island weekend. She wanted him, wanted him more now, wanted deeply, selfishly, to draw him and involve him in her trouble, hers and Mike's soon-to-be trouble, to have him serve as ballast against the certain explosions. She accepted the call cautiously, and Charlie said, "See me this evening. We have things to talk about." She thanked him and answered that she couldn't, not for a while, that she would be busy for a while to come. Charlie's pause and tone told her clearly that this, damn it, was his last call.

She telephoned her parents in Minnesota. Her mother answered, and Fran said she regretted it but she probably wouldn't be coming out for a time, after all. Office vacation plans had got mixed up and she would have to stay till the end of August, at least, and work.

"You're all right? Is Michael all right?" her mother asked.

"We're fine."

"Then that's the main thing."

"Yes," said Fran.

4

With his parents' reluctant consent, Ritchie Atkins prepared to go to Alabama for the remainder of the summer, and tried to persuade Nancy to go with him and a dozen others from Fairfield County. "There's this black group formed in Westchester. They're enlisting all the people they can to go down South and help black farmers there with their harvesting," he explained. "It'll be primitive living, they tell me—you sleep out, and you eat whatever the farmers have, which isn't much—but it's a real thing to do. Will your Dad let you go?"

"How do I know till I ask him?" Nancy answered, and

asked her father, who said no. "I'm not against it, certainly," Daddy acknowledged. "It just sounds *too* primitive for you. You'd want to leave and come home in a few days or a week, and that wouldn't do. Or even if you could stick it out. I wouldn't know where you were."

"When I'm fifty-five, will I be allowed to blow my nose without getting permission first?"

He sighed. "Eventually there'll be some peace between us, princess. I wish you could see I don't stay awake nights thinking up ways to punish you and make your life unbearable."

Nancy walked out of the room. He didn't call to her. She hoped he would.

On the day Ritchie left, along with four others in Buck Styles' car, she received a scary, ghastly letter, with a Maine postmark and otherwise no address, from Gretchen Holt. There was something crawly and proud-degenerate about its rambling, disconnected, sometimes illegible, rhapsodic accounts of the marvelous experiences Gretch and Pat Ronan were sharing with their Maine hosts. "We never lived, never walked, talked, never saw til now," part of the letter read. "We have this room full of mattresses, and we are all together *all* the time, and we are into everything, *everything*, & learning everything about the universe & God & how we are all One, that our mind is going to crack with all the knowledge. Hooray!!! You sure missed a groovy bet in not coming with us. Maybe next summer, OK?"

She tore up the letter, and flushed it.

That day Mike suggested she meet him at Nino's Pizza when he finished work at The Shoe Box. She told Aunt Marcia where she was going, and with whom. "If Daddy calls, tell him I'm seeing Mike Townes," she directed, and repeated the name, emphasizing it.

She met Mike, although she hadn't decided how she would handle his almost certain attempt to continue what they'd started in that Pennsylvania field. She needn't have planned much, anyway, she found, for Mike barely referred to that day. He had something else to discuss over their hero sandwich: drugs.

He'd been into a little meth and a little White Lightning last year—he was strictly grass and hash, now, he swore—and told about Barry Dwiggins. "I chased Dwiggins down the minute I heard, and it looks like he's going to sing out," he said, somehow almost dispassionately. "So when you bake me a cake, be sure to slip a file inside."

Nancy was appalled. "Mike, how awful!"

"Awful because the fuzz may hit me, or awful because I'm that nice boy down the road who freaks out on banana splits?"

"God, both, I guess. It's as if I just learned that my father robs banks. *You*, on acid trips . . ."

Mike made a small smile. "The nice boy's into something else now," he said, and told her about Monica Spencer, and Flip Byron and Ruthanne Cumberland. Nancy was shaken and fascinated and refused to believe him. He detailed it all so carefully that presently she did.

And presently he asked, "How about you, Nance? You could really swing there."

"Uh-uh, no way," she replied stiffly, and yet kept asking questions.

She didn't want to go to Bridewell Park. Mike walked her home, and she eased him out, staving him off with cloudy promises of another time, because of course he would go for her, even with Marcia in another room. Alone, she ached to call Ruthanne Cumberland, the one girl at Miss Barnaby's she looked up to, the one girl she could not imagine doing the wild, intriguing things that Mike had described. Was Mike putting her on? No; why would he make up such a detailed, elaborate story?

At last she did call Ruthanne, who had a private phone and who conceded that Mike had told it right. "It was a gas, and it will be again if I'm invited again," she said. "You come along the next time, Nance. Everybody's friendly. Nobody makes you do anything that's not your bag."

"I just may," Nancy lied.

She walked Mop, although Daddy and Marcia didn't entirely approve of her being out after dark, even on Rutledge Road. She passed the Donlin house. Lights were on, downstairs and up, yet she had the eerie feeling that the house was empty.

As well as the eerie feeling that today and tonight were precisely that: eerie. Too much, everything was too much all at once. Pat Ronan and Gretch Holt, nutty but not *that* nutty, giddily drugging their brains out. Other friends, sensible, self-respecting friends, trotting off to sick parties, and without blindfolds. The famous Monica Spencer, perfect and matchless, playing the ringleader. Mike Townes once into hardware, and—who knew anything, anyone?—maybe still into it.

Will Daddy want a hardware stepson?

Has everyone, everything, gone berserk?

Or am I the only one still aboard the S. S. *Jane Austen?*

The next morning, Nancy saw Flip Byron as she came out of the South View Shopping Center, and automatically brightened. Flip did, too. Timorously and then boldly, remembering to keep it light, merely a matter of uninvolved curiosity, she said, "I hear there are some swinging meetings at Monica Spencer's place."

He reddened. "Who told you that?"

"Mike Townes, Ruthanne Cumberland." She waited, and smiled. "All I ever get invited to are movies."

"You'd go there?"

"What's wrong with me? I'm presentable, and I wouldn't embarrass anyone."

She wouldn't go, of course, ever. But through the day she was amazed at how often the fantasy came to her, how it made her shiver, and thrilled her.

5

Harold Archer took the list of names given him by Warren Dwiggins to the assistant district attorney, Noel Ingram, and asked, "What can you do for me, Noel?"

"Bring the boy in," Noel Ingram answered. "Have him repeat these names in a statement. Have him repeat Lewis Brown's name in that statement, and I'll go after a lesser charge for your client: Possession—suspended sentence, no time to serve. I want Brown."

"And these kids," Archer said, pointing to the list.

Ingram nodded. "And these kids. We'll subpoena them—material witnesses—and check them out and see how far the octopus in this town really reaches."

Archer and Warren Dwiggins took Barry Dwiggins to Police Headquarters, and Detective Sidney Demler typed as Barry spoke. Barry signed the sworn affidavit, and reached the toilet just in time to vomit. Bertram Whelan, who covered the police beat for the *Sun-Sentinel*, watched them leave, and said to Sidney Demler, "What's that all about, Sid? Dwiggins' trial isn't ready to roll yet."

"You know better than a question like that, Bert," Demler drawled. "But some names are gonna be subpoenaed and this trial's gonna be a Cameron beaut."

"Confession?"

"Cream of the crop."

"Give me a hint."

"You know better," Demler repeated. "But there're some mighty juicy names. Sons and daughters of some big gun local names."

"Come on, Sid, give. We'll have the nine-dollar lobster at Birdie's."

"You know better, Bert," Sidney Demler repeated.

Bertram Whelan went to Warren Dwiggins' insurance office and asked for the names. "My paper could be very helpful to your son," he said.

"Get out of here before I throw you out," Warren Dwiggins cried.

Bertram Whelan phoned Barry Dwiggins' home. "You'll be in the *Sun-Sentinel* no matter what, young fellow," he said. "Those names you gave Noel Ingram will go in the paper, too, no matter what. Tell them to me now, and you have my word I'll see to it personally that you're treated a whole lot better in my stories than if you don't tell them to me now."

Flustered, Barry thanked him and promised to get back to him, determined he wouldn't. He drove his Porsche into the center of town and out of town, to open country where he could really make this baby fly, and thought about crashing, which would need only a second, and being dead, which could free him. He drove till he heard a motorcycle siren, and laughed when the cop handed him a speeding ticket, laughed so hard that the cop asked him if he was crazy. Then he drove to a Gulf station for a fill-up, and from there telephoned Bertram Whelan and recited part of the list. He didn't light a joint until he was safe at home and in his room. Whelan would come through. You had to be practical. Who wanted to get clubbed on the ass by a newspaper reporter?

The joint helped, assured Barry that everything would work out fine for everybody.

6

Brigid Carmody had been with Monica Spencer for enough years to be surprised by nothing, but she had seen the de-

livery boy from Byron's on the inside premises too often, and she refused to keep still. "Is that why you picked up, bag and baggage, to come here?" she argued, serving Monica melon and coffee on the patio. "To rob the cradle?"

"He's simply a nice boy who wants to be a playwright. I'm helping him."

"I just bet you are! Beddin' up and down with men, even some of those strange ducks you brought around to the Hills, that's bad enough. This Mr. Forbes that was here on Sunday, that you went and had me lie to on the telephone, even if he's happily married, that's—"

"A widower, you'll be relieved to hear."

"Nothing wrong with him, that I could see. But *babies* right out of the cradle! I don't go for that."

"How can you be sure? Don't knock something you haven't tried, you jealous Sligo dragon." She held Brigid's wrist and spoke quietly but imploringly. "It's all in fun, *macushla*."

"*Fun*," Brigid hooted, freeing the grasp. "A middle-aged woman's got no right to have fun exceptin' with her own age. You keep this second childhood foolishness up, and I'm quittin'. And this is all the notice you're gettin'."

Monica laughed. "You won't quit me, Briggie darling. We got our feet frozen at Valley Forge together, you and I. They couldn't separate us with a cleaver."

One understanding given to Flip to pass along was that those guests who cared to swim in swimsuits should come equipped, that those who felt freer without them should feel perfectly free, that those who didn't care to swim wouldn't be coaxed to care to swim. The other understanding was that anything stronger than hemp and booze was strictly *verboten* at this establishment.

Flip's entourage on that humid afternoon at four could have been picked from Central Casting, for they were pearls: fresh young, appealing-young, pimpleless-young. Monica, in terry cloth robe and the subtlest of makeup beneath her eyes and at the corners of her mouth, having armed herself for the occasion with a half-dozen quickly downed drinks, greeted and kissed Ruthanne and Mike and made a special point of greeting and kissing Flip, whose stubborn case of the sulks had obviously not yet abated. The slender, taffy-haired girl named Crystal was prettier than Ruthanne, though her valiant and transparent attempts to be as cool and worldly and unruffled as Ruthanne weren't triumphantly successful. Neither of the two new young men—the modified crewcut

was Gil and the sinewy physique was Shep, or was it the other way around?—was as golden-gorgeous as Flip, but there was a clean, incorruptible sweetness about each of them. The ice-breaking wasn't easy, despite the simulated smiles and Monica's softening-up chitchat. Ruthanne remarked that she was leaving for Dinard and St. Malo in August, and Crystal, evidently another Francenik, remarked that there was no more rapturous sight than the fort overlooking Mont St. Michel. Gil or Shep—the modified crewcut—said that when his parents had been married, he and they and his sisters had lived in the white house at the bottom of East Bank Road. Monica grinned and said, "When you left, there went the neighborhood." And they still sat, smiling stiffly.

She called to Brigid for drinks. No Brigid. She excused herself and went into the house. No Brigid. In the kitchen, she telephoned Brigid's room. "I saw that gang of youngsters paradin' by," Brigid remonstrated. "I won't be a party to *none* of that."

"Very well, then take a nap. Take a trip. Just don't bug me, *macush,*" Monica declared, sharply though with the loose-leash sharpness the dedicated servant, mother confessor and friend could forgive. She hung up and poured herself a sturdy tequila from the sideboard. Brigid had thrown moralistic fits before, more than either of them could number, and would again. No crisis buttons were necessary, thank God.

Flip, who was beginning to bug her infinitely more than the housekeeper, entered the kitchen. "What'm I supposed to do with that gang while you're in here getting tanked? This isn't my home."

She brightened. "Garn, coo, and crikey, but you did harvest a bumper crop today, darling. Darling harvester, with the darling scythe."

"Thanks. Thanks a bunch."

Her palms cradling his cheeks, she lied, "I had a dream last night about you and me. We were making love in the snow. And when we got up, green grass was growing. Cross my heart."

That swung it. He shook his head but he smiled, as though in spite of himself. "You lie in your teeth."

"But it's my own lie, and my own teeth. Come on now, darling, unstuff. Let's be hospitable."

They returned to the patio, and the still ill-at-ease guests were helping themselves or being helped at the bar, which

was good: soda and beer for the young men; Ruthanne was building herself a gin and tonic, and one of the boys was fixing the pretty Crystal a vodka and tomato juice. The hi-fi was into *My Romance,* and a sudden breeze tried, vainly, to cut the humidity. Casually, without prying, Monica learned about her new guests. The modified crewcut, eighteen ("I wear it short so I won't have to be an individualist like everybody else"), lived with his father, a manufacturer who had existed only to enroll him in Dartmouth and who was down on him because he'd goofed off a lot and hadn't enough credits to make Dartmouth or any top school. He was just hanging loose, waiting around for his draft call. Or for something. The sinewy physique, soon seventeen, thought he might dig looking into pro football, or sports announcing, but everything was up in the air. He might go to college. Maybe he'd scatter to Canada. He didn't know. Pretty Crystal, sixteen, lived with her mother, of Women's Lib, and third stepfather, of Men's Lib. She wasn't sure what she was after—a baby she would raise to be useful and good, maybe—but she was decisively sure she would never marry.

The girls drank more than the boys, and oftener. Mike switched from soda to gin and tonic, and then the modified crewcut did the same. Crystal, hobbled by a reserve she seemed to be doing her damnedest to defeat, appeared to be loosening. The hi-fi was souping up *Limehouse Blues.* The humidity was still merely bearable, but there was no rush to accept Monica's offer that they move to the air conditioning inside. A vote was taken, and everyone was ready to try the pool. "Over there's a dressing room for those prudes as wants to change into suits," Monica said, standing and pointing. "Personally I know as a medical fact that swimming in suits gives you acne and ruins the ecology." She dropped her robe and glided grandly to the pool's stairs, neither teasingly nor defiantly, and glanced toward the patio only when she reached the top step and tucked her hair inside her bathing cap. Ruthanne, *la vie parisienne,* had already followed the lead. Crystal was carrying her suit and cap to the dressing room. The boys were marble statues, as though trying to decide if they could be immovable objects and irresistible forces simultaneously.

She dove, and swam. Gradually they joined her, one by one, all but Crystal, clothes strewn over the patio, and she worried about Brigid's suddenly materializing and making a scene, but she worried for only a moment; accidentally

and sometimes not so accidentally, Brigid had witnessed a rich variety of sportive games, and she knew, however resignedly, that she wasn't in the employ of Anthony Comstock. Ruthanne and the modified crewcut dipped under the water together and came up kissing. Flip, melted and happy, swam to Monica from behind, folded his arms around her waist, and she gaily brushed his water-plastered hair off his forehead, and reached down and gaily complained, "This isn't the proud young stallion I once knew." Presently a brow-knitted Crystal, in a one-piece red suit, stood at the side of the pool. Mike, the shy boy his first time here, frisky and a semi-proprietor now, yelled "Hey, Crys, before you come in you better put on your overcoat, too!" Ruthanne yelled, "Acne, acne!" Grinning—woodenly, but grinning—Crystal got out of the red suit and left it on the chaise, leapt in, and the party was formally under way.

Monica was the first out of the pool, followed by the sinewy physique who offered to dry her back. She smiled at him and answered, "Do that later. I'd rather we dance."

"I've got two left feet."

Admiring him, she said, "That's not all you've got, love. Don't be afraid—I'll teach you. Even to dance."

A limpid *These Foolish Things* was playing, and she supposed the pool audience was watching, or soon would, but she took care to look only into the sinewy physique's not-quite-yet humorous eyes. They danced close—she saw to that for a moment and then didn't have to—and she delicately, deftly manipulated him to the chaise, and they lowered to it together and she said, "This part of the dance is called intermission. Shall we see how it goes?"

"Here? With everybody watching?"

"No one's watching, darling. We're alone."

He was awkward, and fast, and good. Monica's smile was benign, and she thanked him when his still tremulous fingers lighted her cigarette.

She was grimly sober by the time they left—everyone but Flip—despite the afternoon's vats of tequila, brandy, and Scotch, and she realized how squalidly little she really cared for Flip, but she was warmed by his having sensed she was in trouble, and by his concern. They sat in the library's hushed light, and she said mockingly into the Scotch and rocks he had brought her, "There are times, my beautiful friend, when I am not a happy clam."

"You were acting plenty happy."

She nodded. The gathering had served its abysmal, frolicsome function, and no one had gone home hungry or noticeably depressed. Inhibitions had been attacked and dispersed. The combinations had been intricate, faceless, stag-movie subtle, and Crystal, the most embarrassed and constrained at the outset, had gone home certainly the least hungry, the least depressed. Monica regarded Fip, aching to say, *I'm sick. Stop me. Help me. Kiss me and make it go away. Know me. Help me. Stop me. Stop me.* Instead, she wept (Spencer's Rule: *Thou shalt let no one see thee bawl*); wept plaintively and helplessly, furious with herself, as the startled boy held her hard and asked her what was wrong; wept until nothing mattered but that she swiftly tighten every nut and bolt. She did, as abruptly as she could, and she sprang away and drifted to the piano and lit a cigarette, and impudently smiled and said, "Gee, that was fun. I love to try anything once."

"What's wrong?" he repeated.

"Wrong? What makes you think something's wrong?" Slowly, she engineered him to the door, pleading a headache, vowing she would be up and at 'em again as soon as she had some sleep, and kissed him and thanked him for being so dear. Alone, washing a Nembutal down with fresh Scotch, she noticed that it was ridiculously, uncomfortably early—a few minutes past nine—too late to go to New York or to invite someone from New York out, yet too soberearly to face that acre of a bed alone. She picked old trusty tranquilizing standby *Jane Eyre* from the shelf and opened it, and closed it, ten minutes and three pages later. She looked at the tape recorder, thought, *Oh, well,* held the mike, and pressed the button.

I was fifteen, and looked and occasionally acted eighteen, when I fled Holcourt, Florida.

And for the most divinely corniball reason of all: I followed mine own true love, a riverboat gambler, to Hollywood.

Actually, he was a singer—named Brett Ransome; how's that for pseudonymous!—and I had brief social intercourse with him exactly three times and the other kind exactly once. That was the summer my father warily allowed me to take a waitress job at Kirk's Cafe in the Holcourt Hotel. Alvin Kirk was a passionate member of The Church of the Blood of Jesus Christ, and he catered to a family trade. The salary was fair, but the tips were often good, and I rather liked the job because the hours were usually different each

day and gave me the chance to sneak into the movie theater next door, to sneak to private corners with that season's recruitment of boys, to simply breathe for an hour without accounting to my parents.

That was the summer, too, that the Holcourt Theater ran Friday vaudeville shows along with movies, and Brett Ransome, a fiercely handsome baritone with black, curly hair and glorious shoulders, headlined the bill. He was famous in all the posh supper clubs and theaters in the East; the posters said so. I saw the matinee, enthralled — who can ever forget h's stirring rendition of The Breeze and I, *where his rich voice romantically cracks on the high note? —and served him dinner at Kirk's at six, doubly enthralled.*

He was alone, with a copy of Variety. *Anyone reading* Variety *naturally walked with gods. By the time I'd brought his veal chops, I'd told him I'd always wanted a career in the theater. When I brought his check, he said he'd like to discuss my career before he left town. His last show would be done at ten, and he would be heading home, to Los Angeles, the next day. I lied about a heavy date I couldn't change. He said he wouldn't be coming back. That was the tragic end to my brush with the big time and my theatrical career, I was sure, but that heavy date at home with my father and mother, the twin wardens, could indeed not be changed.*

What brought Brett Ransome and me together again? Kismet, kid, kismet. The next morning, Miss MacCready, Alvin Kirk's cashier, beckoned and said "Room 201 wants half a grapefruit, two eggs over, home fries, English muffin, and coffee." I carried the breakfast on a tray into the hotel and up to 201. Who occupied 201? No, you're wrong, not Erik the Red. Take another guess.

Brett Ransome was in bed, the covers off. He wore pajama trousers, and his shoulders began at the east wall and ended at the west wall. I set the tray on the desk, and he said, with an affect so detached it was lascivious, "Sit down there and talk to me while I eat."

I hesitated. "I couldn't do that, Mr. Ransome. They'd have a fit downstairs if I didn't hurry back."

"Then go ahead. I know some guys in pictures, and I scout talent for them, a sort of a sideline. You mentioned you want to get into the business, didn't you?"

"Yes, but · No, truly, Mr. Ransome, I appreciate it very much but I do have to go back."

"How late do you work till?"

"Well, things slow down at around two o'clock for a few hours. I'd love to meet you anywhere then, and talk."

"Okay. Here. Two o'clock. I can leave this hack burg a little later than I planned to."

"Here? I— That won't be easy. This is a small town and everyone knows everyone else, I, well . . ."

"All right. Nice knowing you, kitten. Shut the door after you."

"I'm really sorry. Really."

I returned a half hour later for the tray and dishes. He was in the bathroom, shaving, and I said, 'I'll be here, right after two o'clock."

He nodded, and glanced at me through the bathroom mirror. "You know my name. I don't know yours."

I reached for the glamorous name I had invented. 'I'm Monica Spencer."

Soon after two, I made sure I wasn't seen in the hotel lobby by Junius Butt, the desk clerk, or Tony, the bellhop, and scampered up the stairs, fearful, and vaguely regretful that a hymen could be broken only once. The door was unlocked. My dashing riverboat gambler wore a short-sleeved basque shirt and yellow linen slacks, and I smelled Brilliantine. He was sitting in the only chair in the small room, so I sat on the edge of the still unmade bed and discreetly tugged the skirt of my exotic starched uniform down over my knees.

At two-thirty, the uniform was at the foot of the bed. At three, I burbled to my eternal lover that I would go away with him that very day. My eternal lover shook his wise, show biz head, with marked emphasis when I confessed I hadn't enough money for my travel fare. He tore off several inches of Variety, wrote his Los Angeles address, and recommended that I look him up. Was I desperately in love with him from that moment on? Does night follow day? Do mighty oceans roar? Is the judgment of young girls lunatic oftener than smart?

The bus fare to California wasn't much, but it was twenty dollars more than I had saved. I could have worked another week or so at Kirk's, but did you ever stop to realize how many hours it takes to make up a week? Magnolia Hawkes deathlessly loved and could not endure separation for long from Gaylord Ravenal. I would have to hurry, for he might forget me in a week. Wait for a week? A week, my magnolias.

So I called upon my talents for industriousness, inspired

planning, and perhaps negotiable copulating. I hastened for financial advice to Geraldine Thorpe, Holcourt's funloving, madcap J. C. Penney clerk who gave her favors to only two parties, Democrats and Republicans; Geraldine, an organizational whiz, instantly came to my aid pour le sport, *as it were, rather than for a percentage of the take. She needed a day to institute and complete the arrangements, but she did it with rollicking zest and consummate professionalism. On Sunday afternoon, the day after my hero had gone, I stole out of the house with a quickly packed suitcase and went to Geraldine's flat across town, the flat with the Mae West kewpie doll and the* God Bless This Home *pincushion. Presently her promised ten men appeared, ranging in age from eighteen to forty-five, and in appearance from well groomed to inoffensively tacky. The ground, or rather innerspring, rules were simple. After each client paid the two dollars, he would have precisely sixty seconds to enjoy your obedient servant. Sixty-one seconds would do. To add to the merriment, Geraldine held a stopwatch and didn't budge except to smoke cigarettes and call, "Time!"*

I knew four of the clients by name, three more of them by sight. One client, Everett Knox, managed Holcourt Dairy and pumped the organ—my father's church organ, you understand; my father, who wholly approved of few people, sometimes referred to Mr. Knox as an upstanding, outstanding Christian. Those who recognized Merle Steel's quiet, refined daughter were taken aback, to put it inadequately, though their composure was hurriedly regained when their turn came at, uh, at bat. The performances of half the men that afternoon was middling to pathetic, but I must say I was utterly superb. Before I thanked Geraldine for the hall and left for the trolley that would deliver me to Fort Lauderdale and the bus station she congratulated my skill. Her flattery was deeply moving.

The bus to Los Angeles took days upon days and nights upon nights. At nearly every stop until the grueling trip was half over, I imagined I would be met by my father, my brother James, the F.B.I., the vice squad, and a fire-breathing Jehovah. All that happened, aside from the continual sitting and the rest stop doughnuts, was that a plump and heavily painted blond who may have been as young as thirty or as old as forty got on in Arizona and sat beside me and took occasional, furtive nips from a bottle of Dr. John's Cough Syrup. She was friendly and we talked. I introduced myself as Monica Spencer and said I was on my way to break

into the movies. She introduced herself as Peg Watson and asked, "You know anyone there, or you just going cold?"

"Oh, my boy friend's there. He lives at the Carioca Hotel."

"Where's that at?"

I'd memorized the address. '2664 Pendleton Boulevard."

She paused. "Oh, brother."

"Is something wrong?"

"Who's your boy friend, you don't mind me asking, Sterno Pete or some eccentric millionaire?"

"I don't underst—"

"I know good old Pendleton Boulevard and the hotels and rooming houses on it like the back of my crack, sweetness. The Beverly Wilshire, it isn't. Pendleton's got a name even I wouldn't repeat out loud. It's the elephant's graveyard. You want to find the down and outers, the bit players who don't even have the class to get bit parts, the freaks, the junkies, the two for fifty cents whip and leather boot crowd, don't look any further. What's this boy friend, a pimp? You gonna turn tricks for him? None of my business, sweetness, but you look too stylish for a jar like that."

I made up elaborate lies. Some hours later, with the subject changed several times, I was worried enough to tell all the truth, all except my age. Peg Watson listened and volunteered, "Like I said before, sweetness, it's none of my business and for all I know your man might be the next Vallee or Crosby, honking for a chance just like the rest of us. And you won't take my advice because what are you—seventeen? eighteen?—and naturally there's not a thing you don't know, but chew on this a little, anyhow, from a dame who's been through the mill. If Don Juan's there when you get there, chances are he's got nothing honking for him except two-bit one-nighters, and what's in it for you?"

"Well . . ."

"Lovin's lovin', and God knows I'm the last one to knock it, but the only way it pays the groceries is if you rent your tokas *out. Believe me. Believe me.*

"My what?"

"What you're sitting on. Rentin' it beats working, but only for a while. Believe that, too. The looks start to fade out before you turn around, and even if it's a peck of years before the fresh talent shows up and your pimp has to start charging five bucks less and then ten less because of the competition, there comes that one day—believe me—when you look up at some fat trick pumping you, and you say to yourself, 'Is this why I'm alive?' And all of a sudden, the

only way to get through the next day, and the day after that, is with more ninety proof cough medicine like this and more pills. Believe me. And there's the day that's the worst of all: when one guy's tool looks and feels like every other guy's, when you can't tell one from another. That's really the end of the line, that's when it's time to grab all of the pills all at once."

The anti-prostitution sermon continued, on and off, until there was no more cough medicine and she fell asleep. We were wakened by a breakfast stop in California, which looked no different from the other Western states this pogo stick of a bus had jostled me through. I had a doughnut and canned orange juice—the meal left me with a sum total of one dollar and twenty-one cents—and Peg Watson hunched over black coffee and said, "You think I was bagged last night. Well, I was, a little, but I remember the gist of everything, and I still stick by every word." A waitress walked by, and Peg borrowed a pencil and gave it and a paper napkin to me. "Write this down. Nate Blum," she directed, and spoke an address and telephone number. "Nate's a little Jew agent off the Strip, a pal of mine. He don't have the keys to Metro, or even Republic or Monogram, but he specializes in young faces and builts, and he's on the up-and-up. He won't try to turn you into a hustler. He'll try to jump you a minute after you meet him, but just say, 'Down, boy,' and he'll leave you be if you say it like you mean it. And just nod like you're impressed when he lists you all the stars he made stars. He wouldn't know a star if one bit him on his duff. But Nate does service a couple fair casting directors, and what the hell, you won't lose anything."

"This is so nice of you. But why are you doing it?"

"Because I never met your boy friend. I've met just about every other guy, but not him—but one'll get you ninety he's strictly blind alley and dead end. And I just now became your best friend, and I don't want you to rent out your bucket unless or until it's a hundred percent necessary."

"You haven't told me much of anything about yourself. Why are you going to Los Angeles?"

"Why? That's part of the territory. I'm a bucket renter, between Phoenix and L.A., back and forth, like table tennis. Me and the eagles, we got no permanent address. Tomorrow night there's this foot doctors' convention at a hotel in downtown Hollywood. If I'm lucky, I'll pull a hundred bills for one night's work. If I'm real lucky, I'll meet a spender who'll tell me a new joke and he'll have polka-dot balls."

In Los Angeles, I was given directions to Pendleton Boulevard. Considering my finances, it would have been practical to walk there. I chose to splurge. I took a bus.

The feral-eyed man at the Canoga Hotel knew Brett Ransome but said he was not registered, and no one around expected him for another couple of weeks at then.

Pendleton Boulevard was as that darling, darling Peg Watson had described. I had the image of restaurant lavatory attendents quitting because they couldn't stand the smell from the kitchen—but I checked into the Canoga. I registered as Monica Spencer, and I drew a huge, flamboyant, self-assured circle over the i in Monica. The gods protected me that day. I wasn't asked to pay money in advance.

Nate Blum, small and pudgy, took less than a minute before he made a pass—a clumsy, harmless pass—and, as Peg had promised, he didn't chase me around his desk once he saw all that virginity in my batting eyelashes. He had put Carole Lombard, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, and George Arliss on the map, he acknowledged, and he might be able to do the same for me if I was willing to work like the very devil and place my complete trust in him. He bought me a steak in a relatively clean diner, and as I delicately wolfed my first decent meal in seemingly forever, and as he ticked off the names of all the famous lechers to watch out for in Hollywood, his hand traveled stealthily under my dress. I waited till I'd finished the peas and mashed potatoes before I gasped, "Mr. Blum, where is your hand?"

He withdrew it. And I worked like the very devil and became a star. Not a person, never a person except for a fleeting moment here and there, but a star, you betchum.

Nate Blum moved me out of the Canoga and into—

Monica stopped, sat up, and depressed the recorder's button, suddenly and sharply conscious of remote yet real sounds—footsteps? perhaps, though surely not Brigid's, whose walk she knew. No, not footsteps, necessarily. Sounds. Unfamiliar, unspecific sounds that she had never heard here or been aware of before, sounds like trees falling to the ground, far away.

She phoned Brigid's room. No answer. She called, "Brigid?" from the foot of the front stairs. No answer. The sounds had stopped. With a half-filled glass in her hand, she climbed the stairs, stumbling once, to the top, and hurried down the corridor to Brigid's room. The door was open. She switched

the wall light on. The closet and the bureau drawers were empty except for trivial clothes and trivial belongings, and the larger of two suitcases was gone, and the propped paper on the dresser read, *Have phoned for a taxi & he will be here soon. Will stay in hotel to-nite & send for rest in A M. I can not live in such house longer. Am very sorry. Brigid C. P. S. I will always love you & pray for you. B. C.*

Monica raced from room to room, upstairs and down, desperately switching on lights, all hundred million of them. She swallowed a Nembutal, hastily finished her drink, poured another and more potent one, and locked the unlocked doors. She thought desperately of the chauffeur, Abraham, and did not know his last name, did not know how to reach him; Brigid always did the summoning. She thought desperately of her neighbors who were not near; she did not know their names and was afraid to leave the house to go to them and say . . . what? She thought desperately of Charles Forbes, and did not dare call him.

She drank to stop the shivering. It didn't help.

She phoned Doc McShrink's number in California. The answering service said he would be out of the country until the fifteenth of August. She phoned Flip's number. Something whiny said he wasn't in. "Ask him to call Miss Eastbank, the instant he is," she said, and hung up. She wanted to phone Ruthanne to come to her, and didn't know Ruthanne's last name. She found *Townes* in the directory and phoned Mike, and slammed down the receiver after the dozenth ring. She drank more, terrified. She remembered Waldo and called to him, called and charged from room to room until she found him and lifted him and would not let go.

She switched on the hi-fi, to top volume. She considered phoning Billy on the Coast, and began to, and stopped before she dialed the last digit. What would she say? I need someone here, now, this minute, to hold me and protect me till I'm asleep Billy was Merlin, but not from 3,000 miles away. She thought of calling Gordon Whitehall in New York. Even if he were available, and left instantly, it would take him an hour at least to get here.

A delivery, she thought. Ring up someone to deliver something.

What time do the liquor stores close in this state? Whom does Brigid get the liquor supply from?

She called the first liquor shop in the Cameron directory's yellow pages, the first and then the second and third until

the seventh number answered. "Connecticut closes us up at eight o'clock, lady," a man explained, not unkindly. "I live over my place, is why you got me."

"I'm at 68 East Bank Road. If you'll bring me a quart of a gallon or a pint of anything, at once, I'll pay you for it and fifty dollars besides."

"What's this, some type of a nut call, lady?"

"Please," she begged. "Please . . ."

He hung up.

How many Nembutals had she taken? One? Two? One, so she took another. She carried Waldo to a downstairs bedroom—the upstairs rooms were off limits—and drank steadily, although it was doing no good, and waited for Flip to come to her, and presently the curtain of sleep came down.

In the dream, she found she could not awaken to the spring that surrounded her. It was there, the business of life, of color and perfume, but still she could not rouse herself to feel it; instead, all her perceptions and sensations floated about, unattached, in a liquid mass of grayness. Her thoughts were anchored to the surging waters of her fears. Spring was there, but it did not affect her or leave any noticeable sign that she was there with it. It was as if the rain and fog curtained her view. She saw the high green hill with the parted brown furrows. She saw the straight orange bushes. She even heard the song of birds. But the cold brushed her face and the rain prevented her from entering the spirit of life about her.

. . . The rain, the true, wet rain felt icy and cold on the wakening earth. She saw herself on a large gray carpet afloat twelve inches above the ocean. "No one can see me now," she said, "no one cares what I do. Let go! Let go!" She clung with all her strength to the carpet. She hated it. It was ugly and torn in the corners. Yet she could not get herself to leave it.

. . . With a violent force the wind carried her over furious waves and she felt for a moment that at last she would have to let go. A deadly fear enveloped her as she saw the cupping waves open and make ready to receive her.

. . . She saw herself passing over jagged rocks, angry, permanent rocks. And then she was walking on the seashell- and seaweed-covered rocks with bare feet. With every step she took, a whisperous, spongy sound escaped from the rocks' covering. The sharp, tiny shells cut into her feet, but the pain pleased her and she began to walk faster until soon

she was running, leaping from rock to rock with the wincing of the rocks becoming like music. The wind slashed through her hair. She heard the undertone of the ocean slicing itself against the rocks.

. . . She stood finally on a precipice and saw before her the thin part of the horizon, low and moving.

. . . "I am here," she said.

. . . She was a squealing, ineffably happy Mary Elizabeth Steel, five years old and with full breasts, on a swing, being pushed higher and higher by Daddy, who warned, "Hold on, missy, hold on!" In shame, she turned away.

The whirring hum of a vacuum cleaner opened her eyes to daylight. I made it, she thought. A bear is sitting on me, but I made it.

Isobel, the day maid, said that Brigid had come by early and without a word had taken a suitcase and hatbox to a waiting taxi, and that a package had come, special delivery. Monica drank milk, three tall glasses of milk, and opened the package which contained a play script and a note: *Is this ballsy enough for you, Ugly? Give a buzz. L & K. Gordon.* She telephoned Doc McShrink—it would be only seven o'clock on the Coast, but shrinks never slept—prepared to fly to him this day for a single session, and remembered she'd phoned the night before and he was off somewhere. She sat in the sun and read the play that was semi-ballsy, quite good, and not for her, until Isobel told her there was a call from someone named Flip.

"Have him call me later," she said, and walked deep into her wood, past leaves that gently blew her way, and thought of Charles Forbes, to whom she would resolutely continue to be out. Short and sweet and merciful and so much for us star-crossed lovers. Goombye, nice, mature Charles Forbes; hello . . . who? Orgy Porgy, again?

For the time being. It only hurt when she was conscious.

She let Flip come to her that night, and he promised to stay with her till she was asleep. His mother hadn't given him Monica's message, or he would have sped right back; didn't she know that? He said firmly that he wanted the parties to stop.

"Okay," she agreed.

Isobel located Abraham's telephone number, and Abraham drove Monica to New York. She lunched at the Colony with Lora Morse, a drinking buddy from the Concord Pictures days. Lora, Monica's age, had put on weight and

years, was married to a Greek Orthodox stockbroker, had two grown children, and was celebrating her twentieth successful year in analysis. Monica remarked that she was shopping about, and asked the doctor's name.

"It's Dr. Dowling, and he's an uncanny miracle worker," Lora acknowledged, "but he's booked well into the twenty-first century. All the good ones in New York are. I'll check around for you, though, Mon."

"Do that, would you? There's no hurry."

Glumly driven, compulsively, she telephoned Flip at his market before she left New York that afternoon and confided that the evening would be a pleasant one for a reasonably large gathering. Flip protested, though feebly, as she knew he would. Riding back to Cameron, she thought of Nate Blum again, and gazed straight ahead, and picked up an imaginary tape recorder microphone.

Nate Blum moved me out of the Carioca and into Room 3 of the Hollywood Parisian, a motor court with the color scheme and aesthetic quality of dog waste. The pictures on the walls made you feel you were in Paris, if pictures of mustachioed and winking, bereted Frenchmen on Champs Elysees cum Sunset Strip made you feel you were in Paris (or 'Paris, France," as the motor court manager called it).

Not that I complained. I found the Hollywood Parisian amusing, and Nate's benevolence touching. The Hollywood Parisian overlooked the street, and the continual noise of rushing cars and the odor of car exhaust were in turn deafening and nauseating, but Room 3 had a private john, and I could ring up for sandwiches on my own telephone and sweet Nate would unquestioningly pay the bills. This made me a kept woman, for approximately two weeks. Nate frequently chattered of getting me a plum audition with the high brass at Fox. In the meanwhile, he pulled strings and got me a job behind the corset counter at the May Company. No screen credits came with the job, but he reassured me unnecessarily—that you never could tell when Zanuck or Selznick would pop into the May Company.

Darling, tubby Nate Blum. We amicably ended our business and eternal lovers relationship, after those first few intense weeks, when Mrs. Blum suddenly materialized, like Quantrill's Raiders, and was unreasonably disagreeable.

Oh, yes, I kept phoning the Carioca and leaving my name and number. My dashing riverboat gambler, Brett Ransome, finally returned my calls, and yessiree, he did remember me.

How had I got to the Coast so fast? he asked. By bus, I said. Uh, where're you staying? he asked. The Hollywood Parisian, I said. Who's keeping you? he asked. The Rockefeller family, I said. You got any dough on you? he asked. No, I said. Maybe I'll give you a buzzerroo one of these fine days, kitten, he said. Fuck you, Gaylord, I said.

Class always shows, right?

The first profoundly important thing I learned in Hollywood was that parties given by people in or with movies were not only fun but essential to survival. There were, mercifully, always young transient swains or Nate Blum carbons to escort me to and from these frequent parties. Parties meant food and the possibilities of making contact with effective picture people. But first, parties meant food. I went to every party in town, and sometimes I was ignored except by the man who brought me and sometimes I had to duck or hide when the wrong gent chose to explore my alleged splendor at the wrong moment, but I ate. Bill Fields used to say that if not for the olives in his martinis, he'd starve to death. If not for those canapes and salads and pickles and pastrami sandwiches and cocktail franks during my initial chaotic months there, I might have starved to death.

Might have. Not that I would have. Unemployed applicant movie stars, infinitely my superiors in most or all regards, were bartering their most personal commodities for rent money without perceptible flinches of anguish. I wasn't against it for others—certainly not I, Geraldine Thorpe's junior capitalist. But I watched the mournful procession of jolly whores, especially the aging ones, and hoped I could hold off.

The reason I didn't hang up that kind of shingle, ladies and gents of the jury, is that I was luckier than most. Eleven weeks after I landed in Hollywood, I met my first legitimate and only agent, Billy Gillette, at a party in Culver City. He had me read some Jean Arthur lines from Mr. Deeds Goes To Town, *had me sit, had me stand, had me walk, invited me to lay but didn't push it when I pretended to be puzzled, staked me to some carry-over money, and swung a test for me at Ellington Pictures. I got the job. I lay with Billy Gillette. I would have danced through flame, and would today, for Billy Gillette.*

The picture was West of the Pecos, *and the budget was eight dollars and the refunds from milk bottles. The stars were Buck Chapman and his high I. Q. palamino, Lasso.*

Buck Chapman, a pock-marked, semi-literate, was, God bless free enterprise and the wheel of fortune during those years just before the War, the hottest box office draw in Westerns. Our first meeting was a masterpiece of teddibly civilized dialogue. "All mah supportin' female players spreads out fer me before I start a pitcher," he averred. "Ah'll be proud for the pleasure, Mr. Chapman," I purred, "the moment Lasso's done." Buck and I didn't get on monumentally well. "Cheeky furrin bitch," he kept snarling to the Ellington powers—but I wept as I handed him his six-shooter, and held my head high as he carried me into the sunset and married his horse, and eventually the ordeal was over.

Some ordeal. Distributors, theater managers, and Chapman fans wanted more whatzername, Monica Spencer.

At sixteen, I was still wondering why my father hadn't tracked me down with wrathful bolts of lightning in each clenched fist. I found out why by telephoning Holcourt. He had died. He had died cursing me.

At seventeen, I made a comedy at Concord, Sex Easy Lessons, with Alan Thayer, who was to sophisticated screen comedy what Buck Chapman was to Commanche-stomping. The picture was a wild success, earned fortunes, and brought swift stardom to Granny Spencer. I made two more pictures that year, and consarn if they weren't tremendous hits, too. I learned to drink that year, and to tap dance at parties, and sniff cocaine, and dress well, and sweep into a room like a star. I had two abortions that year. I cried a lot, but I laughed a lot that year. And I got married that year.

The marriage was a doltish mistake, though not for the petty reason Billy and all my playmates presented—that Hap Bowers was an RKO grip who knew a gravy train when he laid one. Teeth-flashing Hap was an error because when he was drunk he reveled in punching people. People like me.

At eighteen, nearly divorced, I worked. And worked. And planned assignations with every man on both seaboards. And, with perhaps the exception of one or two mincing eunuchs, succeeded swimmingly. Without love, to be sure, and rarely with pleasure, but always with utmost courtesy.

And read. Billy, maybe the only agent in history who's ever read anything longer than a contract or a menu, was responsible for the fact that I learned to read. 'You can't believe it now, kid, because you were just born," he would say, "but one of these nights that terrific face is gonna begin to wrinkle, and that firm backside is gonna

start to pucker and widen. Read up. Study up. Learn all you can learn about everything. Don't end up a forty-, fifty-year-old ingenue who can't understand where she lost the bright eyes and high tits and why she can't sell tickets any more." Billy spaketh, and Monica didst. I can't remember where I found the time and energy, but I even took English lit and psychology courses at U.C.L.A. (Wait. I know where I found the energy. Youth, youth, you transitory bitch, why don't you drop by again and set a spell, or have you forgotten who made you famous?)

Alan Thayer, funny and beauteous, and I made five successful goofy, intrinsically urbane movies in a row, and there were fans from Butte to Bangor who knew absolutely that we were husband and wife and who sent us homebaked cakes and blessings. Alan and I weren't even lovers; we frequently played ten-minute house, to be sure, but merely for something to do between calls to the set.

We made while-u-wait hits, and I made news. I rarely courted publicity; publicity seemed to have a way of automatically, invariably courting me. When I was in New York and bathed in the Plaza fountain and had to be bailed out of the divine pokey, where I'd made friends with those divine hookers. When I announced my engagement to three different men in one week's time (and solemnly meant each announcement at the moment it was made). When I threw a glass of burgundy into the face of a renowned liberal Governor who was sitting at the table next to mine in the Brown Derby, and pushed him and his chair to the floor and called out terms that reflected on his ancestry, because I overheard him snarl an anti-Negro remark. When I made civil rights and civil liberties speeches that caused a swinish Senator to call me a Communist, and I sued him for a million dollars and a retraction, and collected the retraction and an eventual fifty grand. When I was drunk. When I was sober, and playing drunk.

I got away with damned near everything and anything. When my winning streak in pictures was at its most monotonous pinnacle, I went to New York and opened in Angela *at the Booth, where the ticket lines curled for months and months around the block. Merle Steel's datter owned the city. The critics and the customers and the city and Merle's datter said so. George Jean Nathan wrote that I was the freshest, loveliest, most dynamic and gifted performer he could recall having seen in a motion picture actress (George associated motion picture actresses with*

athlete's foot), so young and so yet outlandishly undisciplined. Angela *and I then hied us to London the War was over —and London went berserk. So did Concord Pictures, still, and so still did Billy, though not with joy. What the hell was I doing on the stage (which they associated with athlete's foot) when I was making so much moolah, and parting so many waves, in pictures?*

Well, sir, I kept repeating the answer, a perfectly simple one: I wanted to learn how to act.

The week before my thirtieth birthday, I finished The Duchess of Malfi, *the picture everyone had feverishly warned everyone against making because it was odds-on to be a commercial flop—Spencer's first, like the irreparable first loss of innocence. I made it because I tantrumed. I made it because the title role was complex, impossible, leagues upon leagues beyond my range, and I never slaved so in my hard-working, hard screwing life, and it was to me my second Oscar and grossed a bundle, Mamm Concord urged Billy to urge me to rest up for a few minutes and go right into a sure-money confection called* The Lady and the Grizzly *with Alan Thayer. No, I said with numerous stampings of the foot. I need a long, long holiday, I said. We'd put you on suspension, they said. Drat, I said.*

With that week's lover, Marc Gwynne, an intense male starlet with intense long lashes who method acted and method balled, both quite well, and ten of that week's friends whose fares and expenses I paid to come along for the ride, I sailed to Naples The voyage took many years, or so it seemed, but I needed sleep, and I got it with Marc, with Tony, with Herb, with Augie, with Dick, with A-Deck's chief purser From Naples, my merry band and I went to Florence, to Venice, to Rome, to Como, to Lucerne, to everywhere, horny and giddy gypsies, losing a few of the traveling pack along the way, acquiring a few. Ours was the most continuous floating orgy on the Continent, and some of the mornings after ("Are we in Stockholm?" "I think it's Oslo. Wait, I'll call up and find out") were bothersome until the first local hangover remedy did part of its job, but on the whole it was a rest cure. An expensive rest cure, but who counted change, especially when the foreign money was play money, not real? Billy kept wiring when he could catch up with me— that distorted stories were winging back to every newspaper in the States to the effect that Monica Spencer was living the most lurid, hedonistic, dissolute life since the Borgias. Advise. I advised: The stories certainly are dis-

torted; I'm living the most lurid, hedonistic, dissolute life since the Borgias and their cousin Max.

Of course it was all wearying and empty, particularly after the first month. But if you're empty to begin with, how do you learn to wind down?

In Amsterdam . . .

Oh, Jesus . . .

In Amsterdam, I learned to wind down in a hurry. We were laughing hard and drinking harder at the Grotte Club, long past closing time, and we marched through the streets and side streets till dawn and later, drinking that oystery, oily jenever. *One of the bagged entourage — it doesn't matter who—led us to two parked empty taxicabs on Dam Square. Half of us chortled and poured into one cab, the other half into the other. I clapped the driver's cap on my head and drove the first. I drove from one end of the city to the other, partly on its sidewalks, the Dutch gin untroubling because nothing troubled the magical Spencer, and we cried Whoooppp! and Hoo-*layyy-yy!, *and at Nieuwen Dijk I ran down a little child carrying a doll and killed her.*

Through the rest of the drive from the pointless trudge to New York, Monica tried to force the awful picture of the child from her mind, and for moments was successful. Weary and irritable, she was returned to East Bank Road before seven o'clock—weary and irritable because everything was pointless. She avoided the strident ringing of the telephone, and went straight to the nearest liquor supply. The phone stopped. The house was very empty, shadowy, without Brigid, but she would get through the night. Somehow.

Pointless, pointless, pointless, she thought in disgust as she poured the pointless, needed brandy, neat, into a tumbler. The impulsive call to Flip this afternoon—pointless. Hostessing a covey of overheated tots tonight—pointless. Mary Elizabeth Spencer Steel—manifestly pointless.

The brandy helped, and so did an icy shower, but the second brandy slowly pulled her down once more. The phone rang again, and this time she hastened to it, because if she was a good girl and didn't step on the cracks it would be Flip calling to say the party was off, not just for tonight but forevermore.

The caller was Gordon Whitehall. He had been trying her for most of the day, he said, had left his name at least four times with her answering service, and he sounded

relieved to have her at last. "Have you seen the Isaacs script yet?" he asked. "I had a kid from the office take the train with it to you this afternoon, it's that great."

"No, I just got in and I haven't looked at the mail," she said. "Isaacs? Joel Isaacs?" Joel Isaacs was a superb playwright who had never written *Necking on the Roof*. Actresses didn't ignore a Joel Isaacs play.

"And how, Joel Isaacs. This one's a great script, Ugly. In a nutshell, I've known for a couple of months that he had a new one on the griddle and I've been sweating to get it, just like every other producer in town. You know Isaacs and his agent, Gowan, the temperamental twin cantors: they've had seven hits in a row and they know it and they're rugged traders. Anyway, I bumped into Gowan yesterday and I dropped your name. He went to Isaacs, and Isaacs said yes, I can have the property if Spencer does the part, and I got the script this morning at nine and by eleven I knew, and know better than I've ever known anything, that if you turn this one down you'll deserve whatever eternal hell you go to."

"I'll read it, Pappy. Of course I'll read it."

"That's my Ugly. Do it fast. The second you say yes, I'll go right to bat. They're waiting."

Monica replaced the receiver, wishing she could rouse herself to some semblance of exhilaration, of at least confident expectation, sorry she was burned out, hoping Joel Isaacs was her life preserver, shamed because she could sustain no enthusiasm over this possible chance to rise from the dead. I don't want people here tonight, she thought. I certainly don't want lies. What I want is to start this scene over, to have another shower, the one that will revive me and clear the dirt and the gum from my head, and to keep drinking drinks that will soothe and sharpen me rather than corrode me, and read that script and rejoice and see velvet on the leaves.

She could send everyone away. Or simply not open the door. She thought this as she wearily and compulsively dressed in a floral, festive shirt that knotted high above her midriff and showed an expanse of flat belly, and tight, hugging shorts rolled up over her thighs. Her long black hair fell about her shoulders. She regarded herself in the full-length mirror as she drank, regarded the Halloween ensemble, the preposterous, pointless make-believe of still unspent youth, and eventually she was satisfied enough that she didn't look entirely absurd. Absurd, but not entirely.

She found Gordon's bulky manila envelope on the downstairs hallway blonde table. For a moment she was hesitant to even touch it, lest it explode. She carried it to the library off the front hall, thinking, I won't let them in. I have work to do.

With a fresh drink she sat at the reading desk, withdrew the manuscript, and heard the doorbell. I won't answer it, she thought. It sounded again. And then again, even though she pressed the heels of her hands to her ears. She found herself walking out of the library and to the door, imagining herself as a robot with a hot motor, despising the evening ahead, looking forward to it hungrily, despising it, imagining a neon light blinking *Vacancy, No Vacancy, Vacancy, No Vacancy, Vacancy.*

She admitted Ruthanne, and the modified crewcut, and the bouncy Mike, and said to Ruthanne, "You tame the lions for a time, will you darling, and see that everyone gets napkins? I have some more plowing to do out in the west forty." Back in the library, she turned to Page One, Act One, Scene One of *The Lamb and the Cougar. A Play by Joel Isaacs.* Her part was clearly *Diana,* and Diana had lines and business in the very first scene, intricate and stunning lines and business. She read the first scene slowly, as carefully and cleanly as the liquor and the insecurities in her brain would let her, and finally she poured yet more brandy, too much, and thought, I can't swing it. No wound-licking lush could possibly swing this, eight exhausting performances a week. Or even once. It's not a matter of talent. The old lady who sells gardenias in front of the Barrymore Theater has talent; with a diction coach and good legs she could play Clytemnestra.

It's a matter of energy, and stability, and faith. The theater critics would clobber me. The audience critics would get a load of Shambles Spencer, and hoot as they demanded their money back. I couldn't survive that. You are old, Father William. You are tired, Mother Spencer. You lied when you told Gordon, *I need discipline, a hard play, a play with balls, a play that'll make me work. Is there one around?* All that's hot about you is your hot air.

Press on, old woman. Blot out the music and the voices and the jiffy escape hatches outside this door. Read on, old woman, with energy, stability, and faith.

Act One. Scene Two. Diana's Apartment. A month later. Concentrate. You can do it, old drunken woman, old Monica of the Sorrows. Verily, ye can be reborn if only ye con-

centrate. It's not a whit harder than tying the Hanging Gardens together with dental floss.

7

At eight o'clock on that muggy Wednesday evening, as he drove toward 68 East Bank Road, Flip mentioned that the only ones he had been able to line up were Gil and Ruthanne, and Mike Townes, and Georgia Twardesky.

"Georgia who? I don't think I know her," said Nancy Forbes.

"She's kind of freaky, but she's okay."

Gil Huber's car and a Dodge unfamiliar to Flip were parked when they arrived. At the side door to the large house, Nancy faltered again, but Flip grinned and squeezed her hand. "Quit worrying," he said. "There's no electric chair there."

"*Now* you tell me," she mock-groaned, with an uneasy laugh, her voice thin, her stomach tight, still dazzled that she had agreed to come after all her firm certainties that she would not, could not. The door was opened by Ruthanne Cumberland, who held a drink of something, who looked so normal and at home, who greeted, "Hi," so brightly and beckoned them into the spacious house so naturally that maybe it was going to be all right.

"Whose Dodge is that outside?" Flip asked.

"Tom's." Ruthanne replied. "The whiskered one. He and Georgia Whatsit got here a few minutes ahead of you. We've all just met. They're friends of yours, right?"

"Well, Georgia is, sort of," said Flip.

"Sort of's good enough," Ruthanne said cheerfully and hugged Nancy and preceded them to a huge yet inviting room, despite its size a warm and dignified room that immediately reflected grace, certainly not the setting for anything tawdry or conspiratorial. Monica Spencer was not in the room, but Gil Huber was, and so was Mike Townes, and a slender and rather pretty blond, and a man older than the others who wore a light-colored beard and who was the only one seated.

Mike bounded to Nancy, arms outstretched. Gil, dropping ice cubes into a row of glasses at a long bar near a high stone fireplace, called "Hey, Flip. And hey, is that *Nancy? The* Nancy?"

Smile, loosen up, these are friends, she sternly ordered herself, and smiled without feeling it. She let Mike hug her, and forced a bravado that didn't yet comfortably fit, and she called back to Gil, "Why not?"

"Sure," Gil nodded, "that's what I say: why not?"

"You're right on time for the magic lantern show," Mike said, welcoming her with amiable eyes behind his inevitable glasses. He boldly patted her buttocks, which surprised but didn't insult her, and said to Flip, "I hope you brought those slides of Yosemite, man. We can hardly wait."

Flip's grin was broad. "Right here in my pocket."

Gil demanded that orders for drinks be placed fast, before he went off bar duty. Flip said, "Anything." Nancy said, "Anything."

"Two anythings coming up," Gil Haber said.

The introductions were made effortlessly enough. The blond named Georgia seemed no more relaxed than Nancy, but that could have been because she was new here, too. The bearded man named Tom appeared to be totally relaxed. He had a strong face that just missed being sculptured-handsome, yet there was something strangely forbidding about him, something vaguely degrading in the too personal way he looked at her and insisted on holding the gaze, and she was grateful when his probing eyes released her.

Flip brought her a drink and asked anyone, "Where's Monica?" and Ruthanne answered that she would be out in a while. Nancy's drink tasted horrid, but the others were drinking—all except Tom, who simply sat like a cautious rajah, commanding in his silence, observing movement—and so she didn't allow her distaste to show. She was aware of Flip never far away, and that was good. Georgia was walking around with her glass, obviously in awe of the palatial room, and Mike didn't touch the blond with the long legs and large eyes but he peered extravagantly down the front of her clinging yellow dress and drawled, "Forgive me if I sound fresh, madame, but would *you* happen to have any Yosemite slides in here?" Georgia looked at Tom, as if to be told how to respond. Tom, the rajah, grinned, and the blonde turned to Mike again and, imitating his drawl, acknowledged, "No, but maybe you can do your own sliding, if you're old enough."

It was a whorish remark, but her timing was a partial success, and Nancy obediently joined in the strained laughter. "Oh, Mike's old enough," Flip announced.

"The question is," said Gil, "is he big enough?"

More laughter, awkward and artificial laughter that supported them like a shaky trapeze. Monica Spencer was still dancing, and Nancy drank, and the liquor gave her its word that soon it would taste less horrid. At the record player Ruthanne flicked a switch that brought forth a full symphony orchestra, and there was a willing movement in the room, and Georgia wrinkled her nose and wondered aloud if there was going to be any *real* music.

The bearded man was again staring at Nancy, his eyes burning. She pretended she hadn't seen him and hastily stepped to Ruthanne who appeared to understand and she said, "Come on with me and lend a hand."

In the kitchen Nancy helped Ruthanne with the dishes. Ruthanne shook her head. "Simply and helplessly no help," she said. "Wild man, from Borneo. God knows I certainly don't believe in Equality of the Sexes."

"Where *is* our hostess?"

"Around. Lord, Nancy, stop acting so dense."

"But I am. That fellow, I mean, keeps staring at me. He keeps staring at me. Do you know anything about him?"

"Not a thing, except that I wish he'd stare at *me*." Ruthanne snarled. "Oh, come on, cut it. I mean it, Nancy. I was shook the first time I came here. I unshook in a hurry because the hangups just melt away. You'll see. If we were with a bunch of degenerates, that would be one thing. But we're not. Nobody shoves. You'll see."

Nancy tried. But by then, half an hour after she and Flip had arrived, she knew she couldn't go through with the evening. Maybe Monica Spencer's appearance would change the air and take the pressure off, but for now it was as if everyone was pressing on the point in some cheerless race, all of them fearful of the one finally spread records left, all of them anxious to be led to some fuzzy Nirvana where there would be great gobs of sensuous cakes and erotic candy.

The symphony had given way to *All in a Day*. Flip and Georgia were dancing, and Gil and Ruthanne were nowhere to be seen. Tom nodded to Nancy, who was sitting with Mike, squeezed her shoulder and said pleasantly yet with a quiet forcefulness, "Our dance, chicken."

"Ah, no, thanks," she said, recoiling, unaccountably repelled by his touch.

"I'm—I don't feel like—"

"Sure you do," he said, smiling approval, and raised her from the couch, not roughly but with authority

Instinctively she pushed him. When he frowned and started for her again, she slapped his face.

Chapter 7

1

Monica stood the [illegible] the door [illegible] shoulders began to form a pal[illegible] [illegible] from the hoary chair [illegible] [illegible] swallowed wh[illegible] [illegible] carefully wa[illegible] [illegible] feet of this [illegible] [illegible] by the hand and [illegible] [illegible] and, appalled [illegible] by the address that seemed to have entered her whole life. Something in plaid almost bowled her over as she went to join the masquerade ball.

She was [illegible] even of her entrance. She came into the living room at the moment an uncommonly pretty dark-haired girl pushed a bearded cowboy and tripped as face

[illegible] watched the others [illegible] this tense moment, heard the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] boy [illegible] [illegible] by the wrist, and growled. The girl, [illegible] both [illegible] [illegible] away. Fuzz, [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] to [illegible] his step, [illegible], and the cowboy growled, "What's the beef, mate. No harm done."

[illegible], and Monica [illegible] Everyone saw [illegible] she replaced [illegible] in the [illegible] with her own crackle as she [illegible] deeper into the room. "There [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] at this [illegible], she said quietly, "but violence [illegible] out. At the first whimper of warfare, the party's over. Understood?"

The pretty girl's name was Nancy. The stringbean was George. The cowboy was Tom. And I'm tired of all of you already, Monica thought trying a few stabs at cordiality nonetheless as the tension gradually evaporated from the air—though not at all from her. They appeared to [illegible]

that she had brought no welcome mat, and she drank too much, and cared about the missing hospitality, and didn't care.

And knew soon that nothing was going right, that it couldn't be made right or even tolerable. She resented the fresh loveliness of the one named Nancy, resented the flickers of disappointment, of disapproval in the child's very young eyes. She knew she was perilously close to coming apart in front of everyone, knew they were all sitting on eggs and waiting for the crash, and resented the way they were shutting her out, setting her apart. Despite Mike's game attempts to be amusing, despite her own attempts to stay in the room and out of the spotlight, they were watching her, talking now and then but seldom taking their eyes off the caged and keyed-up old tigress who was ready to spring.

Ruthanne entered the room, followed by the crewcut, both of them looking slightly rumpled and more than slightly pinkcheeked, and Mike helped to cut some of the oppressive tension by kidding them about their absence. Freed from stage center, Monica returned to the bar, and soon Flip was with her. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"The matter?"

"You're all hung up about something. Is it because of the hairy grub? I don't even know him. I invited Georgia along, she said she had a friend, so I said bring your friend. If I'd thought—"

"The fact of the matter is, I don't cherish any of your friends," she said, surely hurting him, caring only that she was feeling drunker and meaner. "Your little friend Nancy, for example, keeps gawking at me as if she can't wait to get back to the convent before curfew. I don't find that precisely endearing."

"Oh, Nancy Forbes is all right. She just hasn't been around much, that's all. She'll ease up if you will. We'll all—"

Monica blinked. "Nancy . . . *Forbes?* As in Charles?"

"What?"

"What's her father's first name, do you know?"

"Well, yeah, it *is* Charles Forbes. He runs *Brant's Weekly*. But what's the—"

Monica shivered, and laughed. He asked what was funny.

"Absolutely everything, darling, including floods and the bubonic plague. Ab so lute—ly everything."

The music was soft, vapory. She left Flip and carried her glass toward the dark-haired girl, but the stringbean blond interrupted the weaving journey with, "I want to tell you

t's awful nice being here, Mrs Spencer. I bet I've seen just about every one of your movies on television when you were an actress."

Stepping cautiously, Monica Spencer moved in for the kill. "What role of mine [illegible] to be?"

"Wha—"

"Wha? You're not acting now, baby. I'm Spencer, baby, star light the star you'll never be ever, and don't you forget it!" She [illegible] "Now, Mr. Flip, I'm sorry that the [illegible] but I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to [illegible] Flip, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to [illegible] with the [illegible] "Sometimes, Wendy, baby," [illegible]

"Please, I—"

"Well, you don't [illegible] Monica's star always [illegible] never seen before!"

The child looked at her. "I've seen enough, thank you, Mrs. Spencer. I'm sure you're not playing it well, and I'm not either. I'm sorry you won't [illegible] the rest of the evening feeling sorry for you."

"What's [illegible]" Flip was all going to [illegible] and Monica repeated, "Why the hell is asking you to?"

"Monica," [illegible] "I'm sorry you're unhappy. I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment, but that's the kind of [illegible] I come from. Flip, would you mind taking me home?"

"Yeah, I [illegible]"

"Oh, I'll [illegible]" Monica [illegible] "Price on horse and I'll bet [illegible] and Monica the Wreck plays with [illegible] with a real man. That should give Daddy Claus a surprise and a merry chuckle."

What am I doing? Why?

"Monica . . ." said Flip.

The child caught the wallop. "Explain that. Please explain that. How do you know my father?"

"What you mean is, how well do I know him? Extremely well," Miss Goodyears. "He's had the pleasure of my company, among other things. So don't glance down your [illegible] at *me*, kiddo. Your [illegible] isn't all *that* spot-

less. She turned to Flip and directed, "Take Lady Bluestocking to her noble papa, and then come right back. *Right* back."

In the john off the first guest room, she bathed her burning eyes with cold water.

What do you do for an encore, once you've established your credentials as Mary Poppins?

You press on and climb higher mountains, naturally.

She swept back to the party, shifting to a fair imitation of high spirits, and smiled brightly at everyone so everyone would know that all was magically well with Monica. Ruthanne asked her about Nancy and Flip. "They eloped," she answered. "Let's take one more trip to the bar and then we'll all elope."

As Monica made herself relax, the others relaxed, too. The most casual of them, she noticed as she drank, was the bearded man, who sat observing her covertly from the fireplace chair and whom she seriously saw for the first time. He was from the outskirts of Marlboro Country, and she had rarely ever been scared by ostentatiously unwholesome types, yet as he talked she found herself held by the insolent, sensual gaze of him.

And presently she found herself carrying a glass of beer to him. He was holding forth in an animated and confident voice, rattling out a curious mixture of profundities and Sunday Supplement platitudes in complicated sentences that often got lost in their own complexities. The language was alternately erudite and hip, self-conscious and forceful, and if the content was familiar—the glories of doing one's own thing and answering morally only to oneself—there was something about the man's aura that held everyone's attention. Monica listened and sensed vitality and even power. She discovered that she was bringing him a beer, not because he'd requested it but because he'd quietly ordered it, ordered her. *(When? Where was I? Where am I?)* His piercing blue eyes met hers as he reached up and accepted the glass, and he didn't thank her, and she was, perversely, roused all the more. He was playing down-home sinister as surely and consciously as she had resumed playing boundless youth, yet the chemistry, voluptuous and irresistible, was commencing to be exactly right.

The evening was righting itself, after all. I'm not reeling drunk any more, she thought. Here we get happy again. Flip will soothe the Forbes girl for me. She's young. The

young are resilient. She'll forgive me. By tomorrow, she'll have forgotten the best of East Bank Pond.

"I've read a bit by Nietzsche," Marlboro County was saying, and Monica turned her attention to him, inwardly tearing him apart with fear. "He was a great man, and he was struck on about Christianity being the morality of the weak and about the way that most people only know how to be part of a herd. But where this great cat fell out of his trees was where he wrote that people are born to either be aristocrats or sheep and you can't change that. Like her, you can't change that. Even a cat could be a superman if he knows that's what he wants to be."

Ruthanne crossed her legs and leaned across. "The German nationalists read Nietzsche, too," she said, "and they agreed with him and agreed with you and put the two together and called it Nazism. They chose to corrupt *Thus Spake Zarathustra Beyond Good and Evil* in order—"

"Hold on there," he interrupted, not unkindly, reaching Wallace's belly. Boy, was Wallace pregnant. It almost took one, but he was purring slightly for his newfound friend, and Monica supposed that natural affection "gentled some unmanageable." "The herd that Nazi herd before Nazis became Nazis for a while at first seems, on the surface, the way they were brought up: don't, don't, follow discipline, don't do this, don't step there. . . . So a paperhanger makes the scene the right time, the right place, and they all flip over him."

He sat forward, but Wallace wouldn't leave. "Don't for a minute think Hitler wouldn't have sold to hog-tell if those same Germans had been raised with no guilt. I mean no guilt, no fences around them. I mean following all their natural instincts, which are what? Mate everybody in sight if they're fertile, babies that mothers as long as every bird's singing. Evil's what comes on the wars, the violence, the cruelty. Living without guilt brings *more* loving."

Ruthanne took her empty glass to the bar and smiled mysteriously at Monica, an intimate smile that Monica managed to read as something, *We wouldn't be seen with him in a Paris tearoom, would we, but he rather turns me on, I'm not sure why.* Tom stood suddenly. The room seemed to grow smaller.

"When there's love, there won't be sheep and shepherds any more," he said softly. "When we strip away all the lies, we'll all be naked to each other. That's when we'll all be free. We won't have to make ourselves out to be important,

we won't have to set ourselves apart. There won't be haves and have-nots any more, because we'll all have each other." His face was dreamy, as if he saw things still invisible to the rest of them.

At the bar, Ruthanne said, "But we're not all alike. There are age differences, differences in goals and abilities. Some of us can do things the rest of us can't. You're being utopianistic, aren't you? How can you strip away those differences?"

He smiled at her, and then walked to Monica, who involuntarily tensed. All eyes followed him as he took her hand and led her to the middle of the room. He moved in front of her, eyes drilling into hers. She waited, surprised by how easily Svengali had commanded her.

"Sure, we're different," he said to the silent, frozen circle. "You're kids, and this is a big movie star, a big celebrity. So how do we strip away the differences?" His hand went to her blouse, and slipped the knot. He pulled it from her shoulders, and then he methodically unzipped her shorts and slid them down her legs to the floor. "That's how," he said. "Just like that."

Her body stiffened more, her mind was numb. *This is mad,* she thought. *Some of them have seen me naked before.* And knew it was not the same, that she had never been this naked in her life . . .

"Without the clothes, what do we have?" he was saying. "We don't have the famous movie star any more. We have a woman like all women with breasts"—his hands moved over her breasts, cool and tingling with electricity—"with a belly and hips and legs"—his hands moved down across her stomach, brushed lightly through the nest of hair and to her thigh—"a woman who can feel pain"—his other hand moved to her breast and took the erect nipple between thumb and forefinger.

Her legs went weak with the pain and debasement as he squeezed, and she wanted to cry out and could not. The ring of faces, the staring eyes, swam in her vision, and he said, "and a woman who can feel pleasure," and as he pinched the nipple harder his other hand moved up the inside of her thigh and his finger entered her, and as he leaned forward to kiss her, squeezing and probing, she experienced a flash of unbelievable hotness, and his mouth sucked at hers and she felt her knees begin to give way beneath her and, burning with furious shame, she ran.

She ran upstairs to her bedroom, slammed the door, and

flung herself to the bed and clawed at the blankets and sheets. She thrashed about under the blankets, nerves screaming, teeth by trying to get a grip on the unfamiliar night. Later, much later, she heard a noise that didn't alarm her so much as it demanded her focus. The business of getting warm, the business of hiding.

He came into the room. The cowboy. The bastard.

"Get out of here," she whispered. "This place is off limits to sadistic cretins."

He sat on the bed, plucked the duvet on to his lap. *Sunday Income Post* comics, as ever, strong, everything about him suddenly reproachful. "I thought you were dead."

"The others left," she said. "I left, too. I came back."

"Why? To humiliate me some more? And without an audience?"

"You don't want to put me down that way, now do you?"

"Oh? Which way would you prefer? Don't *touch* me, you two-bit preacher!"

He crooked a finger, beckoned her, affectionate buckle. He found her hand, held it, and said, "You're cold. That's bad."

He raised her cold hand from his groin and gazed at her with humorless hypocrisy of sweetness, kindness, and he said, "It's all right. I'm here."

"Who are you? What are you?"

"I'm Tom. And you're safe."

And so she was. He was so kind, so very good.

Safe. Monica was safe at last.

2

All that Elphaba hoped, as he returned Nancy to Rudledge Road, was that she wouldn't light into him or, much worse, cry. She did neither. She sat beside him, straight and stiff and tearful. Turning into Rudledge, he found the nerve to speak.

"It was never like this before," he said. "Tonight just got totally out of sync. I don't know what was eating her, why she was that vicious."

Tomb silence.

"I never would've put you through a grinder like that, Nancy. There wasn't any excuse." A pause. "You believe me?"

Still no contact.

At her house, he sighed, "What else can I say, Nancy? I'm sorry it happened."

She nodded, still not facing him, but she softened a little. "It's not your fault, Flip," she conceded. "I knew where I was going. You invited me, and I said yes. Only . . . oh, only nothing. Don't get out, all right? I want to go in by myself."

Her house was lighted. Flip waited until he saw she was inside, and aimed the Chevvy automatically toward High Branch, which would take him to Overridge and East Bank Road, where Monica was waiting for him.

At the corner he headed instead in the direction of his own home. The hell with Overridge, he thought, the hell with more of the same. I don't need any more of fruitcake Monica tonight.

Tonight, or maybe ever again . . .

He supposed he didn't mean it. He had sworn off before, acutely aware in clear moments that the whole scene wasn't worth those occasional gazes and gasps of love she gave him, had sworn off only to fly to her, his tail wagging, the instant she crooked her finger.

Of course it wasn't love. Love was what you gave and got back. Love wasn't some empty barrel you had to keep working to fill.

In the next few days, the folks would go to their Asbury Park wonderland. He would have the house to himself, and for a time his life to himself. He would sort out Flip Byron, figure out just where he could make a beginning for Flip Byron. Maybe tonight was good, after all, he thought. Tonight spelled out the whole scene, tonight told me in neon letters that there's no kick in rolling in mud any more. I'm done being Flip Doormat for the old man, for Monica, for anyone. I have money saved up. I'll go someplace where there's plenty of room to meet myself. There has to be something, someone good away from Cameron.

His Aunt Audrey's Ford was parked in front of his house. His parents' bedroom light was on, he saw from outside, and the living room was dark, and suddenly Flip tensed, thought of his mother, knew something was the matter with his mother. Audrey was Mom's sister. She lived in New Canaan, and she never came to the house because she and the old man had never got along.

He ran in. The dining room light was bright, and his father was at the table, alone, slumped and staring at the edge of the table, eyes open but lifeless.

"Dad . . .?" he said, tentatively, frightened.

The old man didn't move. Then Fip saw the telegram. *Master Sergeant*, something about *regret to inform*, he read before he stopped cold. *We regret to inform you that your son, Staff Sergeant Howard Banks Eyre* . . .

"Oh, Jesus, Dad!" Fip cried, and rushed to embrace his father, to enfold him.

"'Oh Jesus Dad,'" his father croaked, not loudly, and shifted his weight and wouldn't let him hold. "Who you 'Oh Jesus Dadding,' you dirt, you worse than nothing! He's home a couple days before he leaves to go where it's so happy, so alive, my Howie so alive, you got to hang out here with your an-ti this and an-ti that, you got to tell him the enemy's right and he's wrong. Don't you come near me, you shit son of a bitch loser, you, you touch me I'll *kill* you, you no good bum, my Howie's dead, you bum! Dead! Breathe, live, eat, sleep, walk, sing a song, take a breath—he's dead. My Howie's dead, and you you're alive. Why wasn't it you? Why wasn't it you, you shit kid, you, God in Heaven forgive me, why didn't you get it instead of my Howie? My Howie . . ."

He punched out at Fip, with feeble fists that barely grazed. He rose heavily and lowered, and sank to his knees and weeping on his hands, and his fingers scraped at the carpet. "Ass. Hm. up there way it wasn't you, not Howie, not Howie . . ."

3

The local express that carried Charlie Forbes from New York on that Wednesday morning reached Cameron at twenty past one, a quarter of an hour late, a shade better than par for the Penn Central. Forbes' day at *Brant's* had been a long one, and tomorrow's promised to be longer. He drove his Ambassador straight home from the station's parking lot, eager for Nancy to be there and to tell her the decision he'd made that afternoon. We'll go away somewhere in August, just you and I, he would tell her. Okay, I did say I'd be too busy for a vacation this summer. I decided today that I'd just get unbusy. Where would you like to go, princess? New England? The Coast? The Continent? It's late for good reservations, but not too late. We'll spend a couple of uninterrupted weeks together, and have

fun, and talk, and get ourselves back on the track again.

Nancy would buy that. All the bumpiness of the past weeks would be forgotten.

He let himself into the house through the garage, recalling that the Humphreys were treating Marcia to a play at The Long Wharf near New Haven and that she might not be back till late. "Nancy?" he called. "Anybody home?" The door to his study was open. Nancy was sitting at his desk in her robe, gravely examining the contents of a highball glass in her hand. "Well, you look uncommonly executive there," he said, and smiled.

She didn't glance up, and Forbes sharply sensed that something new had happened, something drastic. "This is pretty awful Scotch," she said flatly. "The Scotch at Monica's is better."

Forbes stopped. "Monica's?"

"Monica's. Monica Spencer. I was there a little while ago. You know her. She knows you. She sends you her love, and she told me to tell you she can't wait to have you screw her again."

"She told you—What's this about? What were you doing there?"

His daughter looked at him, and he saw hard and a suppressed but genuine fury. "That's right, Daddy dear, stand there with your clerical collar on and start preaching to me all about morality. You've always been wonderful at that." She swung around in the swivel chair, so abruptly that some of the whiskey, if that was what it was, splashed over the rim of the glass. "I was there because I was invited. See, I'm more honest—when I go to a depraved woman's house for a sex orgy, I admit it. You don't. Why are you so shocked? Why is your face so white? Because your dirty secret is out, that you wallow in bed—not only with your lady friend Mrs. Townes, but with people like Monica Spencer?" He tried to summon words, but she kept on. "Don't be shocked, Daddy dear, be proud. All those years you had me believing you were fine and perfect. You fooled me, and I'm not easy to fool. You ought to be very proud of that."

She stood, and placed the glass on the desk, almost daintily. Heavily, mortified, Forbes said, "If I'm to make any sense out of this jumble, I want you to begin at the beginning."

"I'm going up to my room."

"Like hell you are! This is hardly the moment for high

dramatics. There's been some grisly set of misunderstandings, and I don't follow a bit of it. Sit down."

"Oh, you don't have to get nervous about my virtue. It's intact. That's all you care about, anyway, isn't it? You can be as two-faced and deceitful and underhanded as you please, but I'd better stay your three-year-old idiot infant forever. That's all you want."

He caught her at the door and held her arms. "Nancy —"

"I never want to see you again," she seethed, and wrenched loose, and ran from the room and up the stairs.

She would not stir from behind her locked door, although Charlie Forbes knocked and called to her for angry, helpless minutes, knocked and called until there was nothing to do but . . .

What? Goddammit, do what?

In his study, the terrible mortification thundered back, fused with a clamorous anger. He raised and smelled the highball glass. It was indeed Scotch, and he drank some of it. He was out of cigarettes. He searched through the desk drawers, and found one, and paced, and forgot to light it. Nancy would be calmer in the morning, and this weird, unreal night would be sifted surely between them and straightened.

No, it couldn't wait till morning. He buttoned his jacket. He would drive to East Bank Road. He paused. Marcia wasn't home yet. He couldn't leave Nancy alone in the house.

God. Jesus God, what happened?

He found Monica Spencer's telephone number in his red metal directory. He dialed it, got it wrong, and dialed again. His fingers drummed and his head split as he listened to ring upon ring, and at last the answering service chirped, "Miss Spencer's wire."

"This is Charles Forbes. You will somehow get to Miss Spencer, and instruct her to ring me back at once." He spoke his number. "At *once*."

"All I can do is wait for her to check in with us, Mr. Forbes. She's had several calls in the past hour or so and she hasn't picked up."

"That's not good enough," he said stiffly, aware of being foolish, fully aware of how answering services worked. "You are to instruct her to ring me back immediately."

"We'll do our best."

Monica Spencer didn't call. He knew she wouldn't, and minutes later he placed the call again, with essentially the

same message, and received essentially the same response. Marcia returned, moments after midnight, babbling about the lovely play and the lovely Humphries. "I'm going out," he said.

"Out? This late, Charlie? Is anything the matter?"

"No. Nancy's in her room. I'm just going out for a while. If I get a call . . . Oh, never mind. Go to sleep, Marcia."

He drove. There was no one else to call, no one else to see. Incredible. Monica Spencer was a neurotic—that was scarcely a scoop—but not that sick, not to that unconscionable, incomprehensible a degree. He drove faster, and he shook.

A car was parked near her closed garage, but her house was dark. Forbes pushed the front doorbell, many times, and walked to the sides and the rear of the house, searching. He saw a faint light at the corners of a second floor window shade, and rang again, and then again.

Then, finally, he drove back home. There, he finished the remnants of the Scotch that was on his desk, and looked about for more.

Sleep eluded Forbes until long past three o'clock, though he wakened automatically at seven on Thursday morning, as he did on every workday morning. Marcia gave him his coffee and *Times* after he had shaved and showered and dressed, and for a while he considered not going into the city, and knew that would be impossible. There was an unbreakable 10:30 budget meeting in his office. Too many people would be waiting for him.

"What time does Nancy usually get up when there's no school?" he asked Marcia.

"No special time, Charlie. Why?"

"Because I'm asking, that's why."

Marcia shook her head. "And can you ever be a bear when *you* get up! I'm after Nancy constantly about her hours. She reads, or writes letters, or listens to the radio sometimes till just before dawn, most nights, and then naturally she sleeps the best part of the mornings through. I'm always at her about it—I hear her from my room—but you know how it is: one word from me."

"I'll do my best to get home early tonight. Tell her that, will you?" Driving to the railroad station, he realized that the unbreakable meeting was of course breakable, it was that he was no more prepared to face Nancy yet than she, probably, was ready to face him.

He didn't have to take Monica Spencer's telephone number with him. It was memorized.

The meeting lasted till one. The moment he was free and home, he phoned. Miss Spencer still hadn't checked in, the servant said. He left word that Miss Spencer should expect a next call and wait for it, and he hadn't reached her when he returned from lunch with Ned Gilmore.

"Why was my daughter at your house last night?" he demanded.

"Now that's an opening line and a half from someone I haven't heard from in ages, Charlie," she said cheerfully, and he supposed she wasn't as breezy as she tried to sound.

"I put a very simple question to you. Why was she there?"

"Really, my friend, I gather it was because she chose to come and no one stopped her. There was an informal get-together here and she was brought. For what it's worth, and I think it should be worth a great deal, I had no idea who she was or that she belonged to you until well after she and the others got to the party."

I want to know more, he thought. I don't want to know more. "According to her, it was an orgy."

"Oh, come off it! Orgy! Nothing that exotic or corny happened. You have an extremely attractive girl with a cavernous imagination. Yes, some of the people did hold hands—not your daughter's, incidentally, again for what it's worth—but I doubt if she was brought here against her will. And she left very early."

Damn it, exactly what are you all about? Parties for teen-agers, when all I want my child to know about you and me . . ."

"Ah, maybe that's where the nerve pinches," she declared. "There was a you and me in the long ago, wasn't there? You're making noises like an overly guilty papa."

Evenly, controlling his rage, he said, "No, I'm making noises like a responsible father who's going to give you a warning just once. How you deal with whatever emotional sickness you have is your affair, but let me hear or even suspect that you've come anywhere near my child again, ever, and you're in for some intensely stormy troubles."

Much of the tough defensiveness left her voice. "Okay, sir, I hear and obey. Never again."

He hung up and sat and stared at the telephone until his secretary, Emily, buzzed to remind him that Ed Jefferson from circulation was hoping for a conference late in the afternoon.

"Put him off till tomorrow. I'm leaving early," said Forbes.

On his way to the 5:08 at Grand Central, he bought the *Sun-Sentinel* and settled in the nonsmoker car. He disliked the Cameron paper, mostly because its technical slovenliness offended him, but it carried the syndicated Washington column of Aaron Hutt, a clever and informative writer whose column didn't appear in any of the New York dailies, and he seldom got around to it once he was home.

The front page ran a picture of Warren Dwiggins' son, and Forbes read a lead story about Dwiggins. Other Cameron teenagers were mentioned as material witnesses. The implication was that each of them was, or had been, users of hard drugs. Leave it to the faultless taste of the *Sun*, he thought, to furnish us with the names of youngsters in trouble.

Among others, he read:

Anthony Becker, 96 Haining Terrace, Cameron
Joan Halsworth, 373 High Branch Road, Cameron.
Michael Townes, son of Mrs. Brandon Townes, 719 Ballender Ave., Cameron.
Christopher Treat, 4 Mathew Place, Cameron.

He cursed to himself and sighed, and read the story again.

"Nancy seems to've got herself a summer cold," Marcia said. "She came down for an egg around noon, and she said she was gonna to stay in bed all day. That's certainly not like her. I tried her door no more than five minutes ago, and called her, and there wasn't a stir. Sleep's the best thing for her. I'll take her some broth when she's up. Why does she have to keep that door locked? I never did like locked doors."

Her knob wouldn't turn for Forbes, either. He telephoned Fran's home, and identified himself to Mrs. Curtis. "Mrs. Townes is over someplace with some lawyer, Mr. Forbes," said the housekeeper, who liked Forbes. "About Mike. You know about poor Mike, don't you?"

"Only about his name in today's paper. How is Mrs. Townes taking it?"

"Middlin', middlin'. I'm just near cried out. I helped *raise* that boy, like he was my very own. What's happenin', I couldn't take it harder if it was my own baby."

He was as gentle as he was able. Then he asked her to tell Mrs. Townes that he was available for anything that was needed or wanted.

Marcia obviously hadn't yet read the *Sentinel*, Forbes

was certain at dinner, for she surely would have had a gaggle of scandalized observations to offer. After dinner, he stood outside Nancy's room a second time, heard her radio playing softly, and knocked. The sound from the radio became softer still, and he said, "It's Daddy, Nancy."

"I'm staying in bed. I don't feel well."

"You'll have a meal, won't you?"

"No, I'm not hungry. I just want to be left alone."

"This is silly, our talking with a door between us," he said, aware of unfairly raising his voice. "Let me in, or you come out. We have things to say to each other."

The radio's volume shot up.

He walked Mop along Rutledge Road. Bill Paxton, the neighbor across the street, was puttering at his front yard garden. He waved to Forbes and beckoned, and Forbes went over to him. They chatted for a time about gardens, one of Forbes' own specialties, and presently Paxton shifted his pipe and the conversation and asked, "You read about those young dope addicts in the *Journal*, Charlie?"

"Just skimmed over it."

Paxton shook his head. "This day and age. How do you pazzle it out, what gets into those young whelps? Those kids in the paper. That attempted," he added, and pointed his chin in the direction of Vic Dembo's house. "The kid and caboodle. I don't know, sometimes Irene and I used to be so sorry we were never blessed with children, but sometimes—well, maybe it's just as well."

"I tell you, it must be the dickens, bringing up youngsters these days, even in these small towns." Paxton continued. "You've got to be walking on air, Charlie, having a straight-arrow kid like your Nancy."

Forbes nodded. "There're always problems, one sort of another, Bill, even with the best of them." He clapped his hands for Mop, and said, "See you around, Bill. Say hello to Irene for me."

4

In his son Howie's room on that Thursday afternoon, the wallpapered room that Marge always kept spotless and ready for Howie, Fred Byron, Senior, drank Old Grandad straight, without ice or water, and touched and examined everything that was Howie's. Though the house was stuffy

built—back in those days, wood was aged a good twenty to thirty years before you even thought to put up a house—he could hear voices directly below, voices and footsteps and cups against saucers. Marge was down there, poor Marge, and some neighbors, and Marge's sister Audrey and Audrey's husband Vincent, and Byron could hear Reverend Ryall's solemn Good Friday voice.

Fred Byron strove to tune them all out. Somebody would come up before long, and knock and want to look in on him, and he wouldn't answer until he was finished here. He paced about, seeing and touching Howie everywhere. The drinking, which he hated, did nothing to ease the angry grief, but he drank; there was less than half of the quart to go, and maybe when it was empty he would be less empty, maybe a little of the terrible pain would be gone. He still couldn't bring himself to be with Marge, to hold her or even talk to her very much or have her see him, and he was sorry about that. But he would weep, he knew, like a woman, and he had wept enough in front of Flip.

Flip. Flip had stayed out last night, still wasn't back. When it meant everything for a family to be together, Flip was off someplace. Not a word, not a sound. As if she didn't have enough tearing her apart, Marge was worried about Flip, about his whereabouts. "He'll be back when he gets hungry," Fred Byron had said.

Howie wouldn't be back.

Someone knocked at Howie's door.

"Go away," said Byron.

"It's Sully and Curly, Fred. We stopped by to pay our respects. We can come by later, if you want."

He admitted his friends, and he let them shake his hand. "We just heard," Sully Washburn said.

The men looked around. "It's a very nice room, Fred," Curly Penner said.

"Very nice," Sully said.

"It's swell of you guys to take the time to come and say hello," said Byron. "Here. How about a drink? There ought to be a couple more glasses in the bathroom. We can go get them . . ."

"Nah, don't bother. We just—"

"No bother," Byron argued, and lumbered to the bathroom, relieved to be doing something, moved by his friends' visit. He took a half dozen paper cups from the bathroom wall dispenser and carried them back to Howie's room, where his friends stood, waiting, looking uneasy, and said

to them both, "Here. Help yourself. This isn't enough, there's more in the house. Liquor, I mean. Plenty more in the house."

Sully and Curly drank a little. Fred Byron drank a lot, and fast. His friends did the talking, which was good, they sort of rambled, because what was there to say? But that was all right. "I don't have sons to send to fight," Curly said. "I got two daughters, bless 'em. But if I had sons, they'd be *proud* to go, and I'd be proud to see them off."

"Terrible thing, the way the world game goes," Sully said. "Some boys, like your Howie, they go out and fight. Other boys, all they know is how to fritz everything up. Spoiled rotten. Look here, what's in the paper today, these kids that take dope—*these* kids, from right here in town! I want to show this to the wife when I get home." He gave the newspaper to Byron and pointed to a bunch of names. "Right there. 'Christopher Trout, 4 Marlow Place.' That's Jack Trout's kid, they live three blocks from me. You know this bum kid's father. Fred Jack Trout, runs that little upholstery place out by Birdie's?"

Byron blinked, tried to make sense out of the piece in the newspaper because Sully wanted him to. He saw the name Christopher Trout, and stared at it. "You couldn't meet a nicer fella than Jack Trout," said Sully. "Works like a beaver, he don't say boo. Wait'll I show this to the wife. She's always screaming where a kid can't go wrong if his upbringing's right. Well, there wasn't nothing wrong with this Trout kid's upbringing. Dope. They gotta have that dope, while decent kids go out and die for them. It just shows to go you, like they say."

Fred Byron kept looking at the piece through his blur, and eventually, as his friends talked, brought its meaning into focus. He knew a lot of people in Cameron. None of these names rang a bell. Then one did. No. Hold on a minute. Yes.

Townes.

Michael Townes, son of Mrs. Brandon Townes, 719 Ballender Ave., Cameron.

I know that name, don't I? he thought.

Michael Townes.

Mike?

Mike Townes? Flip had this buddy he pulled around with. Mike Townes.

Fred Byron remembered. The kid had been here at the house once. Skinny, with glasses. Hair down to his ass. A

high voice, like a fairy, and wearing one of those traitor peaceniks signs on his belt buckle. Byron had told Flip later, "Somep'm about that kid I don't like. I that the best you can find to pal around with, a sissy kid, and one of those peaceniks at that?" There had been an argument. Flip was one boy you could never reason with.

Michael Townes. Howie died for garbage like Michael Townes. Curly Penner was saying something, but Byron stood after a while, swaying a little, and interrupted him. "You fellas're gonna help me do somep'm," he announced. "Okay?"

5

Tom Jan's mama, smelling of liquor and sweet, coaxed, "Come give your nice mama a nice hug, sweet lamb. Now don't you tense and say no," and opened her coat to show him her big bosoms. Her heavy arms wrapped around him before he could clear away, and she hugged him so hard that his breath got caught in his lungs, and she kept coaxing, whining, "A nice hug, just a nice ol' hug . . ."

He bolted upright in his mama's bed. But it wasn't Mama's bed. It was the sweet-smelling famous lady's. The famous lady was on her back, asleep, not as young as last night, her forefinger pressed against her lips like a little child in sleep.

Sunlight splashed into the room from the windows. The gold clock on the table next to her side of the bed read late morning. Too late, Tom thought, I never sleep this late. He left the bed quietly, so as not to disturb her, and closed the bathroom door after him, and took a long, luxurious shower, enjoying the water, the generous space of the stall, the luxuriousness of the event. He dried his body with an ornate towel the size of a blanket, monogrammed *M.S.*, and moved about in her bedroom as he dressed, neither stealthily nor loudly. The famous lady didn't budge. He saw lots of expensive things in the room that surely could be exchanged for some heavy bread, but he touched nothing before he left except the famous lady. He touched her soft black hair and said, "Be back soon, famous lady." She still didn't budge.

At the top of the stairs, he considered fixing himself a king-sized breakfast, but he heard the running of a vacuum from somewhere below, and he continued down the stairs and out the front door. No one was around, except for a

bunch of pretty sparrows going peck-peck-peck on the wide lawn. The day was a beauty, and he paused for a while to look at it and love it before he stepped into Georgia's old trans Dodge. The summer heat made the long green boughs of the trees sleep heavy and low. The blue, cloudless sky didn't stop. A pair of gaudy butterflies were polka-dotting the air with their colors. Beautiful. They were beautiful. Everything was beautiful.

Tom drove with a magical sense of direction, recalling exactly where to turn and where to keep going straight. He reached Stan's Bar & Grille early on that Thursday afternoon, sort of hoping he could avoid seeing Georgia, that he could just collect his gear, the guitar especially, and split, clean, smooth as silk, without noise.

No luck. The apartment above the saloon was empty when he got there, but she buzzed in, carrying two swollen paper sacks with *Grand Union* printed on them, as he was just about packed up and ready to leave.

"Where you think you're goin'?" she cried, strident as a dentist's drill.

"Up, up, and away, chicken," Tom said casually. "I'll mail you a picture postcard somewhere."

She set the sacks down and she fell into a million pieces. "'Postcard?' What's that supposed to mean, 'up and away'? Where were you all night long and till now? With her, right? We come back here and you waited till I turned my back once and you just went back to her, just like that. I sat here, and I sat, and I sat, worried about you, and you were havin' yourself a high old ti—"

"Keep it up and you get hung on that wall by your toes," he calmly warned, rather like her. "Nobody talks to *me* like I'm dirt. You listen close, now. I'm checking out. We've been hanging together too long. I have things that need to get done."

She looked stunned. "Checking out? You're not runnin' out on me . . ."

"Not running. Walking. Otherwise, you're a genius. You get the picture."

A rush of words, a flood. "O Tom you can't, honey, don't go talking like that. You're just puttin' me on . . . ? Tom, my father's comin' home tomorrow from the hospital. I was over there before I went to the store, and he says it's tomorrow. Don't put me on like that, honey . . . what we'll do, I'll put some things in a suitcase in a hurry right now, and you and me, we'll take off. We'll take the car, and

drive anyplace you say and be happy. I'll never once sass you back, let me just go get the suitcase, hon, we'll -"

"No."

"Hon . . ."

"I travel at my speed, at my rate, at my time, at my convenience. I'm leaving you the car and some nice, wild memories. Now back off."

The genius dug that he was serious. She got loud in her desperation, and he didn't like his women loud. "I'll call the cops on you!" she squealed. "I'll tell them everything! How you put my father in the hospital, I'll tell them all about everything that happened in New York City, I won't leave one little single thing out! You hear me? You *hear* me?"

Tom laughed. He moved closer and spoke quietly. "Oh, I hear. I dig. Now you hear me, sweet lamb baby like you never heard me before. I've been fuzz. You haven't. The cops that treated you like a China doll the night your daddy got hurt, they weren't the law, they were babysitters, they were spoon feeders. Real cops'll listen to you, and maybe they'll even find me. But then what'll they let you do, come home and shut the door, say 'Thank you' and you're home free?

"Not real cops, baby. Even you ought to know better. They'll bust your ass with questions. There'll be a dozen of them, all around you, all at the same time, not for a minute but all day, all night, no China doll stuff, they'll have you saying things you don't mean to say, things against yourself, not just me, they'll cut you up good because they have the experience with them, the law with them, because they're smart and everybody else is dumb. It's not like the pretty movies. They'll slice you up."

He watched her shudder. "Okay, baby?" he said. "Are you ready for that? One way or another, the law will kill you, because that's the business the law's in."

Closer. Smiling, and closer. "One way or another, I'll kill you, too, if you decide to try to hassle me."

"I . . . don't . . . care . . ." she whispered. "I'm not gonna be left alone . . ."

He sighed, resignedly. "Then this'll keep you company," he said, and punched her body until her screams stopped.

With his pack and his guitar, Tom hiked back to the famous lady's place. He would stay there for as long as he needed, no longer. When she was ripe -it might take a

couple of days to make her really ripe—he would sing her his songs. At the right time, in the right mood, she'd fall out and . What? With her contacts, she would pick up the phone and open everything up in minutes.

Once the world knew him, the first thing he would do would be to get himself a new guitar. Not a beat-old tuner like this one and the ones before it, but the best guitar ever made, a thousand-dollar, five thousand-, ten thousand-dollar guitar made just for him, for Tom Jara, with his name spelled out on it with real diamonds. It was these cheaple guitars that had been bringing him back to now. Cheapies hid truth. With a great guitar, Tom Jara's guitar, the truth would shine.

Everything goes straight this time, he thought. This is the nearest I've ever been to the heavy gold keys. I won't blow it by coming on anxious, hungry. This isn't the Beany Moon league.

I feel it now. I'm a winner.

What a great day for walking! The trees sparkled in the breeze and the sun. The clear, bright afternoon made him glad he was alive, and he slapped his thigh joyously as he walked faster.

6

There was no reason, other than outright insanity, for Monica to feel good when she rose from bed that Thursday. Wednesday evening had been calamitous, unforgivable. She had behaved like a fishwife, had been recklessly cruel and embarrassing, had begged for every kind of trouble. Her treatment of Charles Forbes' child had been nothing short of obscene—gross and coarse and obscene. To crush the maraschino into the sundae, she had bundled up for the night with that cowboy who, for all she knew, had infected her with terminal tapeworm and stolen the fillings from her teeth and maybe the piano.

Yet she felt sound and positive, if not precisely good. The hangover should rightly have pummeled harder, and it didn't. The guilts should have been crushing but they oppressed her only briefly. She recalled most details of last night's applied psychopathy. If she were to recount them to Doc McShrink, she supposed she might describe them as a purging process, a final, convoluted, grandstand play

to rid her soul of dybbuks and hurricanes before she and *The Lamb and the Cougar* got going. She chose to believe it. Maybe Doc McShrink, who knew all and told next to nothing, would have believed it, too.

She drained a tall glass of chocolate milk for breakfast and took Joel Isaacs' scrip to the patio. The day was garishly lovely, and that was a favorable omen. She read *The Lamb and the Cougar* through, and then again, and was still scared by its menacing dares and challenges, and knew she could do it, knew she *had* to do it. She phoned Gordon Whitehall. "It's a gorgeous play, Gordon," she declared. "Tough and demanding and it frightens the headlights off me, and it's gorgeous. Tell Isaacs I'm his girl, but not for a cent less than fifty million dollars—the fifty million dollars I'll pay him for wanting me. And the grateful wet kisses I'll pay you for thinking of me."

"I'll get right back to you, Ugly. Don't move."

Gordon called her within ten minutes. There would be a meeting in his office tomorrow morning, Friday, at eleven sharp. Money and a good director wouldn't be a problem. Joel Isaacs was set to go.

"Me, too, pappy. I'll be there, with the prettiest bells on you ever did see."

She thought of celebrating with a drink. And vowed there would be nothing stiffer than apple juice till the opening night curtain, if then. The elation that couldn't be induced last night because of fear swarmed about her now; the ecstasy was immense, greater and fuller than any she had ever experienced in the arms of a man. Any man, including that studiously brazen marvel of a longplaying tumbling tumbleweed last night. She stripped and dove into the pool, and swam fast and hard, loving the day, loving herself. She dressed in slacks and halter and took a call from Charles Forbes, wishing it weren't necessary, convinced it was. She handled the call well enough, she felt, not successfully—how could it be successful?—but well enough.

Forcing all of last night resolutely behind her, she walked into her woods, to the favorite place that was hers, the broad chunk of jutting rock whose face dribbled with cold spring water and trickled into little pools surrounded by gray green moss. She sat near the rock and thought, Let the purging process wind up, or down, here and now. Tomorrow, Monica the former Hundred Neediest Cases, gets rich in the heart for fair, and acts accordingly. Today, I must pay up what's left of the scabrous old debts.

Where was I?
In Amsterdam.

In Amsterdam I was not and killed a child with [illegible]. The press and the entire nation was still and eternally [illegible] I was showered with tornado of media and fired and, generally, let go. I've [illegible] since time to time, but I couldn't [illegible] I felt [illegible].

My luck, my curious, bastard, cockeyed perverse luck, stayed. The newspapers in the United States as well as Europe played up the hideous story, the hideous tragedy, but the rules and cues for my soap were few. If anything, God help us, there was sympathy for me. That, of course, was most painful of all.

*I had for a year, I [illegible] years, last sheet of a year I [illegible] clothes, put [illegible] to [illegible], [illegible] to town and sailed the [illegible] a [illegible] I've ever [illegible], for I found [illegible], but part of Ireland, so [illegible] breakthroughly lovely and comfortingly isolated. I loved [illegible] me, alone and barefoot, in the same wool, silky tweeds I loved my silent walks to the village at dusk, over the [illegible] bridge where small boys fished with their tranquil dogs nearby, under [illegible] and pink clouds looking at manicured [illegible] houses at the side of the stream and often seeing a [illegible] all in the distance [illegible] the [illegible] sea and pastures [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

complete man, or complete anything. Roger didn't disappoint me. On our wedding night in Palm Springs, he wept and he wept over having been jilted by his true love, William. The marriage lasted . . . oh, three and a half weeks, at least.

When I was thirty-eight, of all un-chic ages, beauteous Alan Thayer and I rather suddenly decided to elope, because he was between marriages and pictures, and because I discovered with something like astonishment that this man I'd known for roughly twenty years was a man I cared about and cared for. It was a good marriage, I thought, all three years of it, seven or eight months of which we were actually together; Alan had ladies and I had gentlemen, but they interfered rarely, and we tried hard to make it work, including conceiving a child, which I lost in my 4th fifth month. I didn't want the divorce. I became, in fact, shrieky and shrill and obnoxious with pleas when it grew too-terribly clear that Alan simply didn't wish to be my husband any longer. At last I consented to the divorce, and in public I was the unfaltering Lady Chin Up. Hollywood columns - the liturgical music of the nonreligious—claimed that we were splitting as Good Friends. Neither Alan nor I denied it. Talk about obscenity.

On the Live the Moment *tour amid the alien New York City corn, I leapt over the sofa of Curt and Jan Oakes' terrace, and didn't die. I don't think. For the next few years I was on the wagon and on the dreadful glooms, and then I climbed down off the wagon and survived by one part psychoanalysis and three parts party: the boozy, look-ma-no-pants kind of party. The analyst told me I had untapped worth, but he tells that to all the girls. The drifting intensified, formless and conscientious drifting, with the little Dutch girl never far behind.*

I got in with the Doctor Shadow crowd. The Friday night gatherings were held in a Lugosi Moorish estate in North Hollywood that had once belonged to a silent screen star. Archie Kenner took me there the first time, and he was as amused and awed as I by the deadpan solemnity of all the nonsense that went on. Doctor Shadow, a wondrous phony with a well-rehearsed satanic squint, preached that the highest calling of human beings was self-gratification. Fair enough, I guess, though the mumbo-jumbo service he conducted for the dozen or so of us parishioners was so ritualized and muthless that he appeared to be knocking spontaneity rather than fostering it. I knew most of the people there that night, and I was intrigued by their mass

stupor as they listened to the faith healer and somberly repeated his hokum chants; some of the congregation, like Ysaut Toban, were long, long-time friends of mine—certified psychonautics, to be sure, but intelligent, often sensitive, educated psychonauts, certainly, all. Tucked in one corner of the dimly lighted chapel was my darling, urbane Siz, holding a Mrs. Danvers-like candle aloft, humming on Doctor Shake Out Shadow's every Sidney Toler incantation and reading along with him and the rest of the flock a five-minute chant that proclaimed such truths as **googoo oo poopoo woo pizazza.**

"I think I'll be able to throw my crutches away and **walk," I whispered to Archie.**

"Blessings on you, my child," Archie whispered back.

Then came the embarrassing but fascinating goober, a kind of Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in reverse. One by one, several of the congregants confessed their early sins of inhibition and guilt, and testified that now they were free, unhampered, unfettered by the barriers of morality. They proceeded to prove it—as did we all before the evening was **done.**

And as I continued to do nearly every Friday night, drawn to the revolting unsatisfactory freakishness, perversely secure in the shaky supposition that there was safety in numbers, that I could play any wild old demeaning bad games because look at the roster of mummy creatures who were playing them, too. For a year I shuttled between Doctor Shadow and Doc McShaunk, sane to the one nonsavior that I was changing myself, insane to the other nonsavior that I wasn't. Neither nonsavior knew the other existed, because that was the way I chose to compartmentalize the two unhappy worthies named Monica Whozis.

Gradually I'd had enough. And didn't. And did. And didn't. And instructed Lady Gillette to find me a home in **the East.**

Doc McShaunk urged me to stay in treatment. I had to leave California because every time I seriously tried to listen to my conscience—I still had one, as I recall—I got a lousy reception, and that wasn't any fun any more. I had to leave because fear was something I was beginning to learn to live with, like a nervous tic; fear of . . . well, you name it, I feared it. I had to leave because the folks at the North Hollywood church told me I shouldn't.

In the East I would find my feelings and senses again, like a small rabbit just out from its hole in the ground. I

would identify myself with all the color and beauty in woodlands and hills. With no effort at all, I would turn my emotions to the weather, and be serene and brilliant accordingly.

Uh huh.

Here I am.

Okay, so what's happened to the velvet countryside? Where is the lace I'd long ago seen in leaves? I try to hear the soft applause of the brook. Its hurried, hollowed babblings mingle with the wind, and what I see is careless water, racing over pebbles and stones.

The end.

No, dammit, hold it, not the end. I'm going to do Gordon's play, and I'm going to work like a truck horse, and I'm going to be smashing in it.

The beginning.

All right with You, God? The beginning?

Monica returned to the patio with a leviathan hunger, prepared to eat herself out of house and home and to tackle the play as she had never tackled anything before. The cowboy was on the chaise, stroking an adoring Waldo. A canvas sack and—good heavens—a guitar were nearby. She resented his intrusion. She was, unaccountably, glad to see him.

No, not all that unaccountably, she thought. Moronically, perhaps, but not unaccountably.

"As I live and breathe," she said. "Andres Segovia."

"Your pussycat invited me to stay for supper."

"So it appears. But all my pussycat prepares well is *Volaille Pyramide*, and I'm sure you had that for lunch."

"I'll fix the supper. I can whip up a chili'll send you smack out of your skull."

"That sounds elegant, but I have work to do, Tex."

He shrugged. "Any time's fine. Chili doesn't much care when you eat it. I don't have a whole lot to do for the next couple of days."

"Oh? You're planning to move in?"

"For a short while. You'll dig my cooking."

This was, of course, the instant to order him to mount Old Paint and vanish. I need a boarder, Monica thought as she lighted a cigarette nervously—especially a subhuman ranch hand who speaks in grits—about as much as I need another mammary gland.

"That's out of the question," she snapped, and tentatively

reconsidered as she remembered last night. After her goading hatefulness, which had fostered his hatefulness; after the mass humiliations and probably irreparable debasings, he had been a superb machine upstairs, a machine of endless patience and skills. A spooky and markedly ominous man, to be sure, but a man, of sorts, and she wondered if not wanting to—if he possibly could be as good for her when she was sober.

He grinned. "You should have a rap session with your pussycat. He says he won't let me split."

Monica regarded him. Until that opening night final curtain, she thought, I'm taking a vow of abstinence. In these circumstances all the religious faiths combined, organized and disorganized, couldn't expect me to take a vow of chastity as well.

"I truly must get to work," she said. "Soon."

"Sure," he said, and rose from the chaise.

7

Thursday was a rough day for Mike Fowles, because there was no way out of showing up for work at The Shoe Box, and staying. The *Sun-Sentinel* listed his name that day, and those who came into the store and knew who he was and had read the paper looked at him sort of sideways, as if he'd been accused of selling a match to Bridewell Parr. His boss, Bill Fisher, simply asked him if the story was on the level. "Of course not, it's all a mixup," Mike scoffed, and made light of it by grinning expansively. "What do you take me for, a junkie? This Dwiggins guy found himself in a corner, so he figured he could cut some of the heat if he threw a whole lot of names. I'm surprised he didn't say the Marx Brothers, too."

Fisher could have fired him on the spot, the way Frohlich's Bakery had bounced Lewis Brown—could have said, "Nothing personal, kid, but you may be bad for business." Fisher might yet, but that wasn't likely because Fisher was a decent cat. Still, Mike disliked the day, disliked the year, wished he could have been clean from the beginning. There was going to be some sweat; there had to be.

The Shoe Box stayed open late on Thursdays. He was relieved when nine o'clock came, even though home was where the real chill was. Ma wasn't Jolly Molly. Neither

was the housekeeper, Mrs. Curtis, who kept mourning that she didn't know what to think about this young'un she'd diapered and loved and helped raise like her own. Suspicion hung in the apartment's air. Last night, when Gil and Ruthanne had dropped him off from East Bank Road, Ma had been waiting and she'd asked him where he'd been, as though she was expecting him to say he'd been out having a smack. Her tone hurt. Maybe you couldn't blame her, but her tone was something new, and it hurt.

She would stick by him, though.

Approaching the corner, where he would turn right and be home in less than fifteen minutes, he heard, "Townes?" He turned. A man at the wheel of a blue sedan repeated, "Townes? You Mike Townes?"

"Yeah . . ."

The back door opened. The man at the wheel said, "Get in."

"What's it about?"

There was no one around. It was only a little past nine, and here at the corner of Fourth and Rockton, there was no one around.

Another man leapt out from the back seat and hustled him inside next to a third man before he could start to resist. His heart bounced and he thought of Julio Concepcion.

"What is this?"

"Shut up. Just shut up."

He was pinned between the two men. The motor opened and the car sped.

"Hey, now, what is that? Who are you? What *is* this?"

The heavyset man at his right stank of whiskey. The man at his left, the one who'd pushed him in, wore a straw hat and had a whiskey breath, too. The man at the wheel, driving fast, drove as if he knew exactly where he was headed. What do they want me for? Mike thought, panic mounting, what are they going to do? Are they cops? No. I know this heavyset man, don't I? Wait. Flip Byron's father? No. What would Flip's father be . . . The windows are down. If I see somebody, anybody, I'll yell. What are they going to do to me? Concepcion . . . Three men beat up Julio Concepcion . . .

"Please . . ." he said.

"Please what?" the man in the straw hat asked.

"Let me out. What are you going to do? Please let me out."

"What for?" the heavyset man said. "Where you goin'? You got a date with all your dope fiend friends? You and your yella belly dope fiend peaceniks, you gonna get together tonight and go spit on dead hero soldiers' graves? Huh? That how come you want out?"

"You're Flip Byron's father . . ."

"Yeah. And you're the dope fiend slacker punk that turned him against me. Yeah."

"Please . . ." Mike said, not recognizing his own voice. "What are you going to do? I don't understand—"

"I said shut up, didn't I? One thing you're not gonna do: you're never gonna spit on dead heroes' graves again."

Finally, too soon, finally, the car slowed and stopped near a field outside of town. His legs were numb. He couldn't cry out for help to no one, for there was no one. They dragged him from the car because he could not walk, and the man who had driven punched his head so that he fell, and Mr. Byron's foot slammed down on his groin, again and then again, and he could hear them curse but soon he could feel nothing, even though they were beating him and beating him with their fists and then feet and then hate.

"Why?" he pleaded, without a voice.

They're going to kill me.

"Why?" he begged to understand.

I'm going to die.

Let me understand why.

They would not stop. Mike died, but he did not understand.

Chapter 8

1

At eleven o'clock on Thursday evening, Fran Townes swallowed one of her infrequent Seconals and went to bed. Mike hadn't yet come home; he was almost certainly staying out late rather than face her, she suspected with regret and, for the time being, resigned acceptance.

At just before six o'clock on Friday morning she was brought out of sleep by the sound of her doorbell and, moments later, the sounds of voices and an anguished cry that wasn't quite a scream. Hurrying into her robe, fighting the remnants of the Seconal, she opened her bedroom door. Two uniformed policemen were at the front door, only yards away, and Mrs. Curtis, herself in a robe, ran from them in the direction of her own bedroom, or Mike's.

"Mrs. Townes?" one of the policemen asked.

"Yes . . . ?"

She was able to take in part of it before the strength in her legs deserted her and as Mrs. Curtis rushed back, crying, "He's not in his room! His bed's not been slept in!" The body of a young man, about fifteen or sixteen, had been found in East Cameron. No wallet, no identification except for Townes scratched on the peace symbol buckle of his belt.

She was dreaming it, dreaming it all, but the men were raising her from the floor to a chair, and they were real. The body was roughly five feet, six inches tall and weighed approximately 120 pounds and had long brown hair. A pair of black framed glasses, both lenses smashed, was found nearby. There was only one Townes in the telephone book and—

"Where is he now?" Fran asked as Mrs. Curtis wailed.

"At Ward's Funeral Parlor."

She blinked. "Funer—"

"We don't have a morgue in Cameron, ma'am. The body

will be transferred to the hospital for an autopsy to determine the cause of death, if you're the next of kin and give your permission. But you or your husband'll have to come with us and make a positive identification."

They took her and Mrs. Curtis to Ward's, and she saw her baby, and someone gently shook her back to consciousness. Then only Mrs. Curtis was near, and she was ignored by a maze of official-looking people who walked past the cold waiting room, and she watched Mrs. Curtis stand in the path of one of the walking men and demand, "Where's somebody to talk to us? What you have Mrs. Townes waitin' 'round here like a stick for?"

"Please be patient," the man said, and vanished. He returned at last and said to Fran, "Sorry for the delay, Mrs. Townes. We're trying to locate the medical examiner."

And they took her and Mrs. Curtis to Cameron Hospital and told them to wait. Fran touched Mrs. Curtis' arm and murmured, "Please do something for me. Find Mr. Forbes. Charles Forbes." And she waited alone, and Mrs. Curtis came to her and said that Mr. Forbes was on the line, out on the wall phone, that she'd told him about Michael.

Fran went to the hall and picked up the receiver. "It'll take me an hour to get to you," Charles said, "but I'll be there the second I possibly can."

"Thank you, Charles. I'm—I'm in a nightmare," she said, and then collapsed once again.

2

Flip came awake on Friday morning in a motel room four miles from Cameron. The television set was on. He sighed heavily and remembered the past two craddy days.

He had left his father's house and grief and wrath on Wednesday, had driven without sleep or plan through the night, and had ended up in Massachusetts, where he knew no one. And, as senselessly, had turned around and driven back to Cameron. Maybe he could comfort his mother a little. Maybe his father would be different.

He had to park at the corner of Carpenter Street, because there were a half dozen cars in front of and near his house. Two of his father's klutz cronies, Sully Washburn and—he forgot the other one's name—were coming out the front door, and Flip, wanting nothing to do with them, stood

away until they drove off. He entered the house, needing sleep, needing a fresh change of clothes, needing . . . my father, he thought. He walked into the parlor that was crowded with neighbors and his aunt and uncle and the minister and his mother. She saw him and held out her arms. Flip went to her and she said she'd been so worried about where he was, but he sensed after a few moments that she was done with him, that the attention she was really courting was Reverend Ryall's and her sister's and Hazel Brundage's. His brother Artie probably still hadn't been called for at Scout camp, and probably that was just as well. He walked to the dining room, to the kitchen, wandering as he wandered all the way to Massachusetts and back, up the stairs and to Howie's room, where his father was alone, drinking.

"You decided to come back."

"Can we talk, Dad?"

"What about? Your place was here with your mother. Where were you, the whole night long and all day today—with your peacenik fairy friends? That's what you think of your mother?"

With his bankbook and a valise of clean clothes, Flip drove again. The man at the first liquor store he tried refused to believe he was twenty-one, but the second sold him a fifth of Jim Beam. He checked into the motel Thursday afternoon. The room was boxlike and cramped, but his. He filled a plastic bucket with ice from the machine in the hall, and switched on the TV, and began the whiskey. The television picture was blurry, but he sat in the armchair with his feet on the bed, and watched the screen, and considered the limitless things he could do and the places he could go, now that he was at last his own man. He drank slowly, steadily, enjoying his independence, fearing it, sure, unsure. How can people drink this crap? he thought, and drank for many hours, barely moving from the chair until there was less than an inch of liquor in the bottle. He took two nickels from his pocket and staggered out of the room, in his shorts and in search of a telephone. He found one and dialed his home, his ex-home, with his speech all ready: *Hear me out, you miserable old bastard. I'm sorry I couldn't follow your orders, but I'm alive. You won't kill me. No one will. I can't please you? Too bad, you sad old bastard. Just too goddamn bad.*

The phone rang and rang and rang. A lady answered.

"No, you got the wrong number," she said. "You woke

s all up, whoever you are! Don't you know it's two A.M.?"

Flip laughed, and got back to the room, and fell to the bed.

Now it was a quarter to eleven on this Friday morning —*it does is what a hangover is, then daily drunks like Monica can have it*— and he was still sick at noon but reasonably assembled. He drove to Cameron National and withdrew his savings, $231.19. In Liberty Lunch, up the block, Lew, from Cameron High, who worked here part time as counterman, brought him coffee and asked, 'You hear about your buddy Mike?"

"Mike?"

"Mike Townes. It's been coming over the radio."

Flip listened to Lew and went to the john, and lost the Jim Beam. He walked the streets of Cameron, desperate to flee, desperate to be with someone, to make contact with someone. His father appeared in his head, and kept not appearing. He tried to picture Fred Byron, Senior, as a murderer, but the picture wouldn't hide, the image formed but without shape. No, he thought. No. The old man might have been in on bringing up Julio Concepcion. But kill? Could he?

No. Please make it no.

He telephoned Nancy Forbes, who had just heard the news from Ruthanne. "Who could've done such a horrible thing?" Nancy wept.

". . . Let's all meet," he said. "Everybody. Gil, Ruthanne, everybody. You get on the phone and call them. I'll be over to pick you up."

"Yes. All right. But meet where?"

"East Bank Road," he said after a moment. "That's as good a place as any."

Nancy paused, too. "All right, Flip," she said.

3

Monica left Gordon Whitehall's office at midafternoon on Friday, completely satisfied that her life was about to begin again, this time free of detours and way stations. The four-hour meeting had sped by with spectacular grace and basic unanimity—a mammoth feat, she thought triumphantly, because Joel Isaacs was known to be a tyrant toward actors and everyone and everything not within his immediate circle. She had charmed Isaacs and his agent into agreeing to most

of her demands for the moon and the sun, and she was convinced she had been so effective mainly because she was off the gargle.

The closer Abraham drove her to Connecticut, the less completely satisfied she felt that God was concentrating entirely on the betterment and fulfillment of Monica Spencer, but she hoped enough euphoria would remain to get her through to opening night and beyond. With her new broom, the one guaranteed to sweep clean, she would begin to sweep quickly and energetically.

The first junk to be cleared from the attic was Marlboro Country, and today. Because of the pure perversity of it, the perverse purity, she had allowed him to stay on, had liked his chili and his sex-machine bed prowess, had been intrigued at the skilled way he was manipulating her. But enough was enough. He was not only promising to become a bore once his small bag of tricks was emptied, but there were sharp little signs that he was even more of an ongoing crazy than she, and she was hardly in the market for that. He'd shaken her awake this morning, hours before she was ready to be wakened, with some stop-the-presses jabber about his heavy talent as a songwriter, and he'd offered to play and sing right then and there.

"You're insane. Go to sleep," she'd growled.

"You don't want to call me a name like that," he had said quietly, and for a moment, not quite able to see him in the dark, she had imagined he was going to strike her.

Nothing more had happened. She had gone back to sleep. When she was up and finished with her shower at nine, he had surprised her with coffee and sausages and eggs.

He'll leave without a fuss, Monica assured herself as the Bentley neared East Bank. If he gets at all sticky, I'll charm him the way I did those uncharmables in Gordon's office. I'll give him a motherly kiss, and some cash, and see him off. No sweat, as Flip would say.

There were cars in her driveway. The euphoria, the certainty that the Spencer boat could never again be successfully rocked, vanished and was immediately replaced by irritation. The Democratic and Republican National Conventions were convening at her pool: Flip, and Crystal, and Gil or Shep, and Ruthanne, and Marlboro Country, and—merciless heavens, even the Forbes girl . . . What in the blue-eyed hell was all *this* about?

Some of them were drinking. Everyone except Tom looked glum, bitter, moody, unhappy, restless. She snapped

at Crystal, the intruder nearest her, "I apologize for barging in without being invited here today, but would you kindly explain this all-star cast to me?"

"Mike Townes is dead," the girl said. "Someone beat him to death some time last night."

"Mi— O no!"

"I know you should've been asked before we came, but we all wanted a place to meet and . . . well, just be together, I guess."

"Of course!" Monica exclaimed and hurried to the family of kids. There were no hard details yet. The Chief of Police, interviewed on the Cameron radio station's four o'clock news, had said that the death had almost surely been caused by more than one person because of the excessively brutal force used. Monica shook her head at someb dy's offer of a drink and asked, "Why Mike? Why someone so harmless and sweet . . ." and there were no answers, only more mute, bitter anger, and she felt the depth of their loss and marveled at how keenly the loss was hers, as well.

She made her way at last, alone, into the kitchen, where she drank cold water from the tap to stave off tears for the boy . . . and the pressing urge for whiskey. Tom appeared in a minute, with a drink, obviously a stiff one.

"Here," he said. "You look like you could use this."

She shook her head. "I'm off it."

"Even this once? Your little friend'd want you boisting at least one in his honor."

"No."

A pause. Gently: "You must've rated him big, the way this knocks the wind out of you."

Surprised and moved by the softness in his voice, Monica turned and saw a flash of unaffected kindliness in his eyes. Her tears fell then, and she said, "He was so young. It's all such a waste . . ." and Tom seemed for a moment ready, seemed to be trying to come to her and take her in his arms and comfort her.

He didn't. He didn't, she thought, because he couldn't, because he was stopped: it was as if he wanted genuinely to comfort and didn't know how. "Hey, bawling's no good," he said, almost too quickly. "You're made tougher than that."

"I am?"

"Come on, you know that. We're a pair. Those children outside, let them go wailing up a storm, great, but where we're at is somewhere else. Come *on*, we're alone here. Don't make out like you don't dig."

"Would you care to translate that gibberish?"

"What gibberish? How come you're acting stupid, all of a sudden? The kid got himself killed. That's mighty sad, but it always happens to losers—it's *got* to. You know that, so what're you pretending to be so low for? You're like me staying on top's what we know how to do best. With half of a brain cell, when that dummy saw the bad boys coming at him, he could've talked his way on out, home free, and he'd be here now. So he's a dead hero, that's his groove, what's that to us? Come on now!"

Monica regarded him, this cheap plaything, this two-day pacifier she had allowed in her.

"You really are something of a monster, aren't you? And a very sick one."

"Sick? What's sick, spelling out the truth? The two of us, we're the movers and the shakers, we're not flies to be squished, *we're* the squashers, because we're the people that can make things happen. Start *doing* yourself for a change!"

More appalled than frightened, she said, "Spare me that threatening look. Lower the drawbridge. Let me by. I'm going back."

"Pretty soon. Not yet. The two of us, we better head on to getting straight, right here and now. About what's really important, like your doing, and my songs."

"Your—"

"You're gonna fall down when you hear them, and you're gonna call up all your big music friends and have them sign me up."

Angrily, evenly, Monica declared, "Yes, I think we *had* better get straight. You're to gather whatever you brought to this house, and leave. Today. Now. I don't want you here."

"You hold on, stuff. This is *Tom* you're talking to."

"*You* hold on! Just who do you think you are, ordering me about and trying to involve me in your lunacy? Better yet, I'll get your belongings."

"Yeah? Just like that, stuff?"

"Stop calling me that! Get away from me. I find you cheap and nasty and disgusting."

He located his lewd grin, the normally effective one. "Well, well," he drawled. "Seems like only yesterday you couldn't get your fill of Big Tom—say, how about that, it *was* only yesterday! I should've made a tape of all those wild groans and grunts. Dig who's calling who disgusting."

Too close to her, he said, "Don't miss the rainbow, famous lady. I'm the best thing that's ever gonna happen to you." Then, ominously, "And whatever you do, don't you ever try to cross Big Tom. Ever."

She stalked past him, upstairs to her room, swooped up his canvas bag and preposterous guitar, and hastened with them back to the kitchen. He appeared to have scarcely moved in the minute or so that she had been gone. "Here," she snapped, plunking the shabby belongings on the table. "I'll have someone drive you to town."

"Nobody drives me anywhere like that," he said quietly. "And nobody kicks me out like that."

"Out!" she repeated, and returned to the others, deeply shaken now that she was free, shaken by him, by the fact that she had been attracted for a moment by such mind'ess trash, relieved to be done with him, certain that she was. In contrast, the kids—how young they looked, how young and how very sad!—were clean and, good kids in the most fundamental sense of good, she thought; too ready to be misdirected, yes, but good kids with the good likelihood of growing into solid people, even in a world too jammed with Tom Jaras and Monica Spencers.

Except for Flip, who sat gazing fixedly into his glass, the kids seemed able to keep still only for seconds. The bar stayed busy. The mood was guy wire tense. "It isn't this town," Ruthanne was saying as Crystal slowly paced, as Charlie Forbes' daughter fidgeted in her chair and carefully avoided Monica's eyes. "It's this country, this diseased country. Violence isn't even unusual any more. It's become a way of life in this land of the free."

"We don't need one of your Europe's-more-civilized speeches," the crewcut grumbled, setting his glass down to light a cigarette. "That won't help Mike much."

"All I'm saying—"

"Oh, what does it matter? What does it *mat*ter?" Crystal protested. The crewcut saw Monica and asked if he could buy her a drink. Tom appeared, smiling, carrying not his belongings but Waldo, and the fear that had seemed unreal to Monica in the kitchen was now—unaccountably to her, because she was safe here—intensely real. She sat next to the stonefaced Flip, and very much wanted a drink, and declined the crewcut's offer. And wondered, as Tom approached her, if she could depend on Flip to chase him away if it had to come to that. Flip seemed so cold and distant, off in his own private pain.

The portable radio reported that the police in communities adjacent to Cameron had offered to cooperate in finding the killer or killers of Michael Townes. Tom stood unbearably close to Monica. His smile was huge, and he pretended to direct his full attention to Flip. "What do you say, man? You about done cryin' in your booze?"

Flip seemed to come back, slowly, from some far-off place.

"I'm speaking to you, man," the cowboy baited. "You. You sitting there beside the high society. I'm speaking to you."

Softly: "Okay, grub, bug off."

"Wow. 'Grub.' Now that's like brave—"

Flip poised, as though prepared to rise, but Monica broke in. "I've already told you to leave here," she said firmly and loudly. "How clearly do I have to spell it out?"

Tom blinked in confusion and disbelief, and his eyes instantly switched to cold. "You're crowdin' me now. I'm a guest here, just like everybody else. What am I, some kind—"

Tolerance exhausted, Monica cried, "*Damn* you! That's enough, you—*animal*! Get *out* of here! At *once*!"

He blinked again, and looked at the others looking at him, and he was obviously humiliated. There was a moment's painful pause, and then, impossibly, his smile came back and widened. He winked at the glaring Flip and at the others. He turned to the Forbes girl and asked, "What do *you* say, stuff? You still too high class for Tom, too?" Surely he was churning with some mad reason to provoke and be humiliated even more, thought Monica, either that or some insanity ordered him to humiliate, for he reached for the dismayed girl's arm and said, "You know you got big eyes for me . . ."

Before Flip could get to him, he released the girl, held up two fingers in peace, and laughed. "Cool, cool," he said. "No harm done. Yes, ma'am. Yes, sir. Don't ever wear out your welcome's what they taught us in school. Yes, ma'am. Yes, sir!"

Gracefully lowering Waldo, he gave a comic opera salute and ambled into the kitchen. He brought his guitar and sack out, and smiled at everyone, and walked down the driveway, walking straight and with dignity.

Nancy Forbes needed desperately to go from this place, this opulent house of sleazy sickness, and she asked Flip to

take her. One by one, the others were talking about leaving, too, but Flip said, "I'd hang on a while, in case he decides to come back."

Monica Spencer wouldn't hear of it. "I'll be perfectly all right," she insisted, impatiently though not unkindly, with a finality that made it obvious she wanted everyone to leave. Flip argued briefly, and then agreed.

The cloying odor of sickness stayed with Nancy as Flip drove her from Overridge, the pictures and sounds of lost people saying ugly, dehumanizing things to each other stayed, and she sat low in the seat, fighting tears, and wished the car could fly, and thought, I don't belong back there. I never did. That isn't the place to grieve for Mike, to live, to breathe, to touch so that touching matters. My place is with Daddy. Daddy—and Mike's mother if she'll let me.

Mrs. Townes . . . how torn up she must be . . .

How stupid and cruel *I've* been . . .

Nearing the center of Cameron, Flip, who had been as quiet as she during the drive, said, "I'm splitting this town, Nancy. I think I'll hop back to East Bank for a minute when I drop you off—just to check that everything's okay there, and then I'll cut."

"To where, Flip?"

He shrugged. "Wherever this buggy sends me. Get a job, maybe a bunch of jobs till I find something out there. Maybe till I find *me* out there, I guess."

Nancy listened to him talk, pretended to listen, and yearned to be at home, where what she could touch and hold was hers. A half block from Rutledge Road, she asked, "Will you write to me, Flip? Let me know what you're doing, how you're doing? I'll answer, I promise."

"Sure. When I get sort of settled. I might even be back one of these days. What I may find out is that Cameron's not all that different from other places. Then I'll either shoot myself or come back."

At Rutledge Road, without warning, the tears flowed, uncontrollably. Flip Byron, nice Flip Byron, squeezed her wrist and said, "What's all this?"

The sobs racked and she could not stop. An unexpected, half-sobbing, childish giggle mingled with the weeping, and she grabbed at Flip, who embraced her, and kissed him and kissed him with a hunger that had nothing to do with lust. He embraced her and asked, "What's the matter?" and repeated it. Nancy shook her head, kept shaking her head, indicating *Nothing*, nothing . . .

At last, she straightened, kissed Flip's cheek lightly, and wished him the very best of wishes. Then Nancy Forbes, sixteen years old, got out of his car and crossed the lawn to the house where she lived with her father, Charles Forbes. Aunt Marcia met her at the door and Nancy said, "Please get Daddy. Please get Daddy. Please."

Soon after she was alone, glad to be alone, Monica Spencer entered her kitchen and examined the glass of whiskey Tom had set down when she'd refused to drink it. The ice cubes had melted but she drank the whiskey now, drank it and explained to herself that a single brief release from the pledge wouldn't be all that ruinous.

She climbed the rear stairs to her bedroom, where she placed a call to Billy Gilbert's Hollywood office; Gordon certainly would contact him with details about the Joel Isaacs meeting, but she owed it to Billy to call him herself, needed to hear her friend's reassuring voice. He wasn't back yet from a late business lunch, his secretary said. Monica asked that he ring her when he got in.

Replacing the receiver, debating the wisdom of one more drink—just one—she decided she would swim while she waited for Billy. She began to take off her dress, and then she heard a sound behind her, and she turned and saw Tom framed in the doorway.

Smiling.

She gasped.

"You got rid of your creep friends," he said. "That's good."

Don't show him you're frightened, she warned herself. "For the last time—"

He moved slowly, relaxedly, into the room. "The last time? I didn't hear you the first time, pretty lady, because you just *thought* you were tossing orders around at me. You didn't mean anything by it, you were just showing off, just out to jockey a little. I dig. I respect spirit. So now we're nice and all alone, we can get down to business."

"We have no business together," she said, her voice purposely strong, her heart thumping.

"Oh, we have plenty of business together. You're wrong. You're wrong as you were by that swimming pool when you made me out some kind of a three-for-a nickel bum in front of those creeps. They're all creeps, and you know we could both spit down on every one of them and they'd learn to

love it. But you did wrong. You're gonna quit any plans you have to do wrong to me again."

She walked toward the door. He lithely blocked her path.

"What is it you want," she gasped. "Money? I'm not rich, but I could give you some to tide you over."

A small laugh.

"Then what. You couldn't really've been serious about my helping you place your bets. I don't know anyone in that field."

"Look out, there you go tryin' to put me on again. That's wrong, too. That's dumb. You're dumb, nobody's got brains enough to kill me. Or make me out a fool. What do I want? I want you to sit down.'"

"This has gone far enou—"

Evenly, he said. "What I want you to do is sit down, pretty lady."

Now I'm frightened, Monica thought dizzying. *I'm so terribly frightened.*

"You care to know what your trouble is, pretty lady?" he said gently. "I think maybe you've had it in your pretty skull for a while that I waste my precious time bluffing. There's where you're ten thousand percent wrong. What I say I'll do is always what I do. What's wrong with fancy snotnose ladies like you is sometimes you take too long to believe that, and then I have to punish you. Sometimes I have to kill you. Some sassy ladies it's been a groove to put them out of their misery. But you, I wouldn't like to do that unless I have to."

He's mad. God, God, he isn't tahorn rambling. He's mad . . .

"The two of us, we're gonna run things together, my career and your career. I'm in charge. I'm always in charge, dig? You'll do what I tell you and we'll travel all over and they're gonna know me and look up to me; we're gonna be a team this creep world looks up to." He was walking now, his voice quiet and reasonable. "But in front I start training you. You don't put me down ever again, like you did before, or that's when the punish—"

He was only inches from the door, but she flew from her chair to the hall, and ran, ran faster than she ever had run, down the endless stairs, unable to recall where right led to and left led to, where safety might be if there was safety. *Hide,* she thought. *Hide in a room with the door locked and stay there till the police come.* She heard his steps. *I*

won't be safe anywhere here. She ran outside. *That house down the road. I'll go there and they'll take me in*

She got as far as the pool. He caught her by her hair, and swung her around, and slapped her, hard, and she cried out and he slapped her again. "Oh, you do make all kind of mistakes, over and over, pretty lady," he said, and threw her to the cement floor. "How'd you become a famous lady, being so dumb? Where do you get off, still thinkin' I'm not in charge? I'm me, goddammit, I'm Tom, all you do is mess yourself up if you forget that for a second." She tried to crawl away, to get up and run again, but he was in front of her, beside her, everywhere. He strolled within a small distance of her, saying wild and disjointed things in that reasonable voice, and as he talked he saw Waldo, asleep near the pool's edge, and he picked the cat up and cuddled it and said, "Even this old cat's got more brains than you. I tell him, 'Tom's in charge,' and listen how he starts to purr. Cleverest damn thing—a mangy old cat with more sense than the famous lady."

"Please . . ." she said.

"Please? Please what?"

"Let me be. Don't do this to me any more . . ."

"There she goes," he said to Waldo, stroking its neck, "giving orders again. Never learns, does she, old cat?" He looked at Monica and his smile was gone. "Well, you'll *gonna* learn, pretty lady. You're gonna find out who's the boss from now on," he said, and suddenly he wasn't stroking Waldo's neck any longer but twisting it, strangling it, and its yowls were frantic, and she leapt to save it, and he dumped it to the concrete and it twitched there grotesquely. "There's starters, pretty lady. Just so we understand each other, dig?"

"Bastard! Bastard!" she shrieked, and tore at him, punching his chest with her fists. He laughed, amused by the fly battling the lion, and then he raised his arm high to swat the fly, and she pushed him, and he staggered for a moment, struggling for balance, and lost it and plunged backward into the water. It would take only another moment for him to come out, she knew, out and at her and murderous, and the terror stayed, and all she could do was to go to Waldo.

But he didn't come out. He screamed, desperate female screams, close to the metal stairs, screamed for help, pleading repeatedly that he couldn't swim, couldn't swim, couldn't swim, screamed and flailed and the more he flailed the more into the center of the pool he got. His head disappeared

beneath the surface, and came up again, and he was screaming, "Help, I can't swim, help, I can't swim, help me, help me!" and she stood without motion and watched him drown.

When she became aware of Flip's presence, when she saw him run to the far end of the pool, she realized she had been standing inert, for a very long while. Then she was gazing at the patio floor as the heels of his hands were working, without success, to bring Evan back to life. She sat hunched, her mouth slack, her eyes dull, as Flip found two long beach towels. He covered the body with one and, because she was shivering although the sun was still warm, brought the other towel over her shoulders.

He knelt beside her, and held her, and presently Monica was able to tell him what had happened. "The cops had better be called," he said. "I'll do it."

She shook her head.

"I'll take him somewhere and bury him, then," he said. "That way—"

She touched his arm. "My beautiful friend, my darling, beautiful friend," she said softly, and shook her head once more resolutely. "What you will do is get in your car and drive far away from here and stay far away from here. This is my show, darling, and I won't share being with you. I won't let you be implicated for a moment. Run. Run towards something. Drive till the wind stops trying to catch up with you."

Her face was close to his. "Will you kiss me before you go?" she whispered. "One last time?" He did, sweetly, so sweetly, and then he was gone.

Monica Spencer cradled Weldy's stiffening body as she telephoned the police and reported a tragic accident. When they arrived, she would repeat the story about coming upon this stranger who was there to rob her, of hurrying to the phone out of being threatened by him, of struggling near the pool and his falling in and her pulling him out too late to save him.

It would play. Given the Spencer delivery, it would play.

Waiting with a calm that pleased her, she looked at the cowboy boots which the beach towel did not cover, and thought: Remarkable, even for me, the inventor of self-deception, not to have recognized you till now. You are me.

Me, the logical extension of me, cowboy past and cowboy

future and me, interwoven as a plate of spaghetti, sick drifter, me.

And you were right all along: I will work again, and I will be excellent and rewarded, and you—cowboy future—just might be the best thing that will ever happen to me.

The telephone rang, and Billy's secretary said that Mr. Gillette was returning her call. Would she hold on for a moment?

"Yes, of course," Monica replied. She wished the pool's bar weren't quite so far from her reach, because she rather wanted a drink. One; no more than one.

Then Billy's gruff, gravelly, wonderful voice was on the line. She immediately felt safe, and shopped shivering.

Victor Donlin followed the details of the aftermath of his daughter's murder, and watched the case come apart.

Dr. Mitchell Buckston's girl, Jill, by direction of her mother, refused to testify against Barry Dwiggins, and was quietly enrolled in a school deep in Vermont, where her mother had been a student. In upper Manhattan, federal narcotics agents had arrested Lewis Brown while in the act of purchasing a quantity of heroin for resale. Noel Ingram of the District Attorney's office in Cameron chose not to insist on Brown's extradition from New York. Judge Aaron Kohn, with the agreement of Ingram and attorney Harold Archer, and in view of the fact that Chester Olds had not yet been apprehended, chose to postpone a disposition on Barry Dwiggins for a year, at which time the court would determine how well the first offender, carefully supervised, had behaved himself.

On a balmy Saturday in October, Donlin picked up the *Sun-Sentinel* from his walk and read:

> Mayor Malcolm G. Schumacher yesterday announced formation of a citizens' advisory panel to investigate drug abuse in Cameron, and to make recommendations for treatment and cure.
>
> Heading the panel will be Mrs. Frances Townes of Cameron Community Service. Others on the board include Miss Winifred Moser, Mr. Philip Diamant, and Dr. Gregory Diaz, all of this city.
>
> "It is hoped," said Mayor Schumacher, "that this handpicked committee, answerable to my office, will be instrumental in serving to prevent another drug tragedy such as befell Doris Jean Donlin, who was taken from our community's midst last Spring."

Donlin destroyed the newspaper so that his wife, Edie, wouldn't see it. Then he fixed a double Martini in his and Edie's finished basement and almost saw Dorothy Jean, five or six years old and cute as a button, slapping the punching bag with her baby fists and squealing, "See, Daddy, I can hit it good, just like you!"

'A fascinating blockbuster of a novel'

Book Press

Cameron pretended to be a sleepy town. But underneath its coy facade rumbled a feeling for vice that was all too ready to erupt.

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The other was Tom Jara – a wild man from everywhere, a guitar on his back and blood on his hands, a man filled with lust for power and fury for his fellow humans.

These two came to Cameron like sharks into a goldfish tank and Cameron's sleepiness was soon propelled into a hideous nightmare.

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